

A Case Study of Doctoral Research Assistantships:  
Access and Experiences of Full-Time and Part-Time Education Students

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## **Abstract**

Graduate students' development as researchers is a key objective in higher education. Research assistantships provide distinctive spaces where graduate students can be nurtured and shaped as novice researchers as they develop theoretical and methodological knowledge. However, few scholars have investigated graduate student research assistants' experiences and the ways these experiences are influenced by institutional regulations, informal practices, and social relations. The purpose of this case-within-a-case study was to explore the research assistantship experiences of full-time and part-time doctoral students in Education at an Ontario university. I present separate subcases for full-time and part-time students, and an overarching case of research assistantships in one program at a specific period of time. The main question was how do institutional regulations, informal practices, and social relations influence full-time and part-time doctoral students' access to and experiences within research assistantships. My objective was to draw from interviews and documents to acquire a thorough understanding of the organizational characteristics of research assistantships (i.e., structures of access, distribution, and coordination of participation) to explore the ways institutional regulations, informal practices, and social relations promote, prevent, or limit full-time and part-time students' legitimate peripheral participation in research assistantships. Although I devoted particular attention to the ways students' full-time and part-time status shaped their decisions, relationships, and experiences, I was conscious that other factors such as gender, age, and cultural background may have also influenced doctoral research assistant experiences.

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## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

Governments and funding agencies recognize that university researchers create understandings and discoveries that drive the innovation necessary to deal with complex social and economic challenges. Universities play an essential role in developing the creative, innovative, and critical thinking skills to fuel Canada's knowledge economy where global perspectives are essential to succeed (Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada [AUCC], 2010a). The federal government's investment in researchers is vital for Canadian universities since they are responsible for more than one-third of Canada's annual research activities (Lambert-Chan, 2008). Thus, governmental support for quality research, including training the next generation of skilled researchers, is needed to meet the increasing societal demand for new ideas and innovations.

Canada's three main funding agencies—the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada (NSERC), and the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR)—make significant investments in research and emphasize that research and innovation highly influence Canada's economic prosperity and quality of life (AUCC, 2012). In the changing world of research, the primary objective of SSHRC (2010) is to invest in the development of talented and innovative leaders and outstanding scholars who can drive Canada's success in the 21st century. As evident in their recent report (SSHRC, 2014), the agency not only supports scholarly commitment to effective research training but also develops tools to maximize the impact of training and thus investments in training to

ensure that graduate and postdoctoral students in the humanities and social sciences are able to make strong contributions nationally and globally.

The federal and the provincial governments' commitments to enhancing research and development create expectations with respect to graduate education (Ministry of Research & Innovation, 2008; Rae, 2005). Graduate education is expected to prepare highly skilled researchers who are able to engage in the diversified global research environment. According to McWey, Henderson, and Piercy (2006), research development in graduate programs involves more than taking research methods courses and completing a thesis; it involves participating in educational opportunities to connect and apply theoretical course content to research practice. Such educational opportunities may arise in research assistantships (RAships), during which time students may become involved in diverse components of research.

Research partners—scholars, students, institutions, and funding agencies—recognize the potential for and importance of mutually beneficial outcomes when graduate students work as research assistants (Grundy, 2004; McGinn, Niemczyk, & Saudelli, 2013; Moore, Scarduzio, Plump, & Geist-Martin, 2013; Pollon, Herbert, Chahine, & Falenchuk, 2013). Research assistants (RAs) labour alongside research supervisors on the supervisors' research projects and may participate in diverse assistantship tasks (from designing a study and applying for research clearance to writing reports and presenting at conferences). The development of skill sets through these activities facilitates the acquisition of knowledge that in turn supports the RAs' graduate studies. Mentoring relationships may develop between RAs and research supervisors engaged in RAships, which can benefit RAs and research supervisors. For example,

Saudelli, Niemczyk, and McGinn (2013) found that an RA (protégé) learned transferable skills, obtained knowledge about life in academia, and increased her status by presenting at a scholarly conference. The research supervisor (mentor) benefited from (a) the contributions that an increasingly more competent and confident RA made to the research project and (b) a sense of personal fulfilment from being able to observe the protégé's growth and the ways the protégé commenced mentoring others.

Through my Master of Education (MEd) program, I learned that RAships represent a critical venue within which master's students can learn how to conduct research (Niemczyk, 2010). Such assistantships have potential to provide students with opportunities to apply newly acquired and developing theoretical knowledge and research skills. Moreover, RAships can provide financial resources that may be vital to students' successful degree completion. Nonetheless, RAships are not equally accessible to all graduate students (Bates & Goff, 2012) and not every RAship is a positive experience (Niemczyk & Hodson, 2008; Naufel & Beike, 2013). Extending from my master's thesis and other existing evidence, I present a case-within-a-case-study research design to explore in depth doctoral RAships for full-time and part-time students in the field of Education at an Ontario university. It is important to point out that, although this case-within-a-case study is situated in Ontario, the considerations presented are not limited to Ontario and hence may be relevant to other jurisdictions.

### **Rationale and Purpose**

Graduate students' development as researchers is a key objective in higher education, yet few scholars have investigated this academic and professional development (McGinn, 2006). RAships may provide practical spaces where graduate

students can acquire, practice, and enhance their research knowledge and skills (Grundy & McGinn, 2009; McBurnie, 2011; McWey, Henderson, & Piercy, 2006). However, the majority of the existing literature concentrates on graduate research coursework (Winn, 1995) and graduate thesis supervision (Amundsen & McAlpine, 2009; Bartlett & Mercer, 2001; Grant, 2005; Wisker, 2005) as the venues where research is taught and learned. Much less is understood about RAships and their potential for educating future generations of researchers. In fact, there is a limited number of scholars investigating graduate student RAs' experiences and the ways these experiences are influenced by institutional regulations, practices, and social relations (Edwards, 2009; Hutchinson & Moran, 2005; Molony & Hammett, 2007; Turner, 2010). In addition, considering the fact that full-time and part-time doctoral students typically follow different regulations, it seems appropriate to investigate their experiences separately.

The overarching case under investigation is the RAships in doctoral education in one program in one field at one Ontario institution at a specific period of time. The purpose of this study is to explore the RAship experiences of full-time and part-time doctoral students. Given the potential for these two groups of students to have different access to and experiences within RAships, I develop separate subcases for full-time and part-time student groups. The individual subcases and the overarching case are based upon multiple data sources including interviews with doctoral students, research supervisors, and administrators as well as relevant documents from the site. The main research question is *how do institutional regulations, informal practices, and social relations influence full-time and part-time doctoral students' access to and experiences within research assistantships*. My objective is to draw from interviews and documents to

acquire a thorough understanding of the organizational characteristics of RAships (i.e., structures of access, distribution, and coordination of participation) to explore the ways regulations, practices, and relations promote, prevent, or limit full-time and part-time students' legitimate peripheral participation in RAships.

As evident in the literature review that follows, students' academic status (i.e., full-time or part-time study) was expected to shape and contribute to their RAship experiences. Although a primary focus is on students' status, I recognize that other factors such as gender, age, marital status, parenthood, or cultural background may also influence doctoral students' experiences of RAships. For instance, reviewed literature illustrates that parenthood and cultural background play significant roles in doctoral students' experiences. Therefore, I extract some of these complexities as they emerge from the data and draw upon literature in my field of study to explore these factors as they relate to the case and subcases.

My decision to explore doctoral RAships was influenced by the fact that doctoral students are often categorized as novice researchers expected to transition from knowledge consumers to knowledge producers (Lovitts, 2005) and are recognized as a vital component in the 21st century global knowledge economy (AUCC, 2010b; Evans, 2010). Denicolo and Park's (2013) discussion of "doctorateness" brings attention to the fact that a doctoral degree represents more than the highest level in the hierarchy of academic designation:

The bachelor's degree denotes the acquisition of a body of knowledge while the master's degree requires the acquisition and application of knowledge, the doctorate additionally, and most importantly, requires the creation and extension

of knowledge. Thus it is different in kind rather than being the next in a simple, additive progression. (p. 193)

Trafford and Leshem (2009, p. 311) add that those involved in doctoral-level research need to demonstrate comprehensive understanding of the complexities of research and therefore their ability to think as researchers. Investigating doctoral RAships requires special attention since RAships provide practical research education for future knowledge generators and innovators.

Selection of the research site was narrowed to one specific field in order to acquire a thorough understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. My decision to investigate RAships for doctoral students in Education was driven by three main factors. First, I am extremely familiar with this field of study. I know this field as an insider. Second, I was also conscious that Education scholars often engage in scholarship that is directly connected to their fields of practice. Although there is considerable diversity within Education scholarship, a significant number of Education scholars focus on their roles as educators and undertake research relevant to educators' needs and the needs of those they educate. These kinds of research are essential for the professional development of scholars (current and future) and for the advancement of pedagogical spaces and practices. Third, although I am very interested in possible disciplinary differences in the preparation of new scholars across fields, I was concerned that including multiple fields of study would add a level of complexity that could detract from my main interests in the influence of students' academic status on their decisions, relationships, and experiences.

I selected a specific doctoral program in Education because it is one of a few programs permitting students to complete their studies on a part-time or full-time basis. As reported by Saliba (2012),

The vast majority of PhD programs in Canada require that students be registered full-time for at least the first four years of their program . . . . A relatively new phenomenon is the introduction of the flexible-time or part-time PhD program. These programs allow students to complete the entirety of their program on a part-time or flex-time basis, assuming that students are electing to remain employed while completing their degree. (p. 8)

Considering the purpose of my study and the focus on students' status, it was essential to select a program with options to study full time and part time.

### **Relevant Terminology**

The following definitions are intended to clarify the meaning of the key terms used in this study.

*Research assistantships (RAships)* refer to positions doctoral students undertake to expand their research knowledge and skills while assisting research supervisors with their projects. RAships are understood as practical educational spaces that provide research opportunities and have the potential to foster the growth of confident and competent researchers attuned with dynamic research environments and the needs of society. Sometimes institutions offer RAship positions to nonstudents, undergraduate students, and volunteers to assist researchers in academic research; in this research study, the focus on RAships is limited to doctoral students paid by the university or by



individual research supervisors to assist in research. Doctoral students who accept RAships are known as research assistants (*RAs*).

The term *novice researchers* refers to doctoral students who are developing their identities as researchers through active engagement in research methods courses, RAships, theses or dissertations, or other aspects of relevant research communities. The term *researchers*, on the other hand, refers to instructors of various ranks, including lecturers, assistant professors, associate professors, and (full) professors.

*Research supervisors* are researchers who employ RAs to support their research agendas or to provide practical research training for future generations of researchers. Research supervisors are expected to nurture the development of novice researchers (Strike, Anderson, Curren, van Geel, Pritchard, & Robertson, 2002) and provide them with educational opportunities that advance their research skill development and self-identities as researchers (Grundy, 2004).

*Educational RAships* refer to assistantships that provide space for students to increase their research knowledge and allow them to discover responsibilities associated with being researchers. Following the logic of legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991), students working as RAs do not remain on the periphery for long when they are engaged in educational RAships. Students in educational RAships are stimulated to engage in research practice and to gradually become fuller participants in a research community; therefore, they have opportunities to progress from being novices to becoming competent researchers.

The term *ethical RAships* refers to RAships that are educational and emphasize respect, reciprocity, and fair treatment of doctoral students hired as RAs. The focus in

this study is on fairness and recognition of RAs' work because of the power imbalances within the relationships between doctoral RAs and their research supervisors.

Ameliorating the power imbalances involves demonstrating the kinds of virtues such as respectfulness, sensitivity, and sense of fairness that Macfarlane (2004) identified as ethical responsibilities of university professors. Strike et al. (2002) claimed that it is an ethical obligation of academic supervisors to ensure RAs are educational and to attend to the welfare of individual RAs. Demonstrating Macfarlane's virtues and providing positive educational experiences are critical components of an ethical RAship.

*Student status* is a term used to differentiate full-time and part-time doctoral students' positions within the university. Opportunities for social co-participation are differently distributed and made accessible to part-time and full-time students. Therefore, student status is a significant factor influencing doctoral students' experiences and their engagement in a community of practice.

Engagement in RAships can contribute to the development of *researcher identity*. The activities and tasks in which doctoral students engage become the means by which they come to see themselves as members and participants in a research community. Through RAships, doctoral students may begin to develop identities as researchers, RAs, students of research, or as junior colleagues (McGinn, 2002; Nyquist & Wulff, 1996).

The term *institutional regulations* refers to formal documents outlining norms and principles related to RAships. The university under investigation relies on these documents to define roles, responsibilities, and rights of those engaged in RAships.

*Informal practices* in this study represent unregulated practices employed by research supervisors in hiring and supervising RAs. Research supervisors frequently

adopt past experiences (as supervisors or as students) without attention to current regulations or guidelines.

*Social relations* refer to multileveled relationships within RAships as well as institutional structures that influence RAships and the experiences of doctoral RAs. Smith (1990) refers to relations and institutional structures as “ruling relations” that influence individuals’ practices and lived experiences. Personal relationships and institutional structures involve situated powers (Hinchey & Kimmel, 2000). Power imbalances within the relationships between doctoral RAs and their supervisors may make students feel vulnerable and reluctant to speak up. In addition, students often maintain compliance and do not challenge institutional regulations or practices, conscious that they have too much to lose (Hinchey & Kimmel, 2000; Wartenber, 1992).

A *knowledge-based economy* relies on the production and use of ideas rather than physical labour to ensure economic growth. The reliance is on knowledge, information, and skills that are used to promote economic and social development. The relevance for this research is that a knowledge-based economy puts pressure and expectations on higher education institutions to produce highly skilled researchers and scholars. National and provincial Canadian governments incorporate this expectation in their policies and programs when they allocate resources to universities (AUCC, 2010b).

The concept of *innovation* used here is a broad one. It entails the translation of educational research findings to the public and market in order to fuel economic innovation and social progress. However, the overall emphasis is on the importance of higher education and the role doctoral RAs play in creating new knowledge and new ideas. As reported by the Canadian Association of Graduate Studies (2012), the Ontario

government has an important position in supporting academic research and doctoral students' development as researchers.

Case study research may focus on an individual case or a set of linked cases (Creswell, 2011). Considering that full-time and part-time Education students within one doctoral program are expected to experience RAships differently, I consider these two groups as separate subcases within the overarching case of doctoral RAships. Therefore, the adopted design for this study involves two subcases within a case, which is considered *case-within-a-case-study* design (Gondo, Amis, & Vardaman, 2009).

### **Researcher's Positioning**

I locate myself and illustrate my personal investment in this research in order to become a visible research instrument. My commitment is to engage in this research study with reflexivity and to avoid taking for granted my identity as a researcher. Kamler and Thomson (2006) claim that reflexive scholars apply to their own work "the same critical stance, the same interrogative questions, and the same refusal to take things for granted as they do with their research data. Developing a reflexive disposition is profoundly about the being and doing of scholarship" (p. 66).

I am a Caucasian woman with Eastern European background coming from the lower middle class. I was born and raised in Poland until I was 19-years old. The key aspect of my early education in Polish classrooms is connected to the communist political system in place at that time where thinking critically and expressing personal ideas were not encouraged. In fact, for many years, questioning teachers or written materials was an unfamiliar concept to me. I was used to accepting "facts" presented in school without further investigation and relying on them as absolute truths. I experienced the "banking"

concept of education where the teacher was a depositor of information for students to receive, memorize, and store (Freire, 1968/1970). The communist government used the educational system to maintain power by instilling values and beliefs in the next generation of citizens such that all people were educated in government approved ideology. This approach translated into authoritatively set ideals and norms infused in all educational institutions, which as McLaren (2009, p. 63) states, reflect understandings of knowledge as socially rooted and interest bound in relationship based upon power dynamics.

The Polish educational system of that time did not encourage creativity, inquiry, or critical consciousness. Being immersed in the banking education system for many years led me to assume that control over students' thinking and actions was the norm in education. This paradigm shifted only after I immigrated to Canada and enrolled in post-secondary education where I experienced "education as a practice of freedom as opposed to education as the practice of domination" (Freire, 1968/1970, p. 69). Discovering the value of thinking critically, questioning, investigating, and engaging in critical arguments was definitely a life-changing experience.

My undergraduate studies in Canada brought a glimpse of liberation to be able to voice my ideas and share my opinions, especially in seminars. Yet, I often hesitated because it felt unnatural to question reading materials; I also felt that my English speaking abilities were not strong enough to express my thoughts fluently. At first, I found it difficult to engage in collaborative discussions, group activities, critical thinking, and conversations about personal experiences that were encouraged during the seminars.

With time, however, my appreciation and comfort level for active participation and collaborative knowledge construction expanded and so did my passion for learning.

Engaging in academic dialogue and seeing myself as an active participant in the learning process gradually became a gratifying and inspiring experience. The transition from banking education (in Poland) where students were treated as containers to problem-solving education (in Canada) definitely stimulated my reflection, made me question my beliefs and perceptions of education, and led me to view education as a cultural terrain that promotes student empowerment and transformation. Dewey (1916), Freire (1968/1970), Vygotsky (1978), and other social theorists refused the traditional learning model where teachers deposit knowledge and encouraged learning contexts in which students play active roles in learning.

My undergraduate experience, although challenging and frustrating at times, fostered in me passion for learning and interest in applying theory to practice. However, it was not until I became a part-time MEd student, which granted me the opportunity to work as an RA on multiple projects, that I began to develop my identity as a researcher.

I have worked as an RA since beginning my MEd program in September 2005. Through varied RAship experiences, I have acquired a broad range of research skills, have had opportunities to present at national and international conferences, and have become a published author. Being exposed to the research community and having space to engage in academic conversations allowed me to navigate and make informed decisions about my graduate studies. I am convinced that I could not have gained such rich experience solely from my research methods courses, my thesis, and my dissertation. Exposure to real research scenarios, interactions with different research communities, and

ongoing academic dialogue have deepened my understanding of research and the impact of innovation.

RAships highly complement the research knowledge I have acquired in research methods courses. Most of my RAships were extremely positive and allowed me to acquire an abundance of research skills and establish mentoring relationships. Yet, at times, I also experienced a lack of support and realized that sometimes ownership and authorship are subject to informal arrangements and the individual expectations of a research supervisor.

Initially, I perceived RAships as practical spaces that benefit students as well as research supervisors. I assumed that graduate students engaging in research projects would be offered opportunities to develop research skills, participate in research presentations, and potentially acquire publications, whereas research supervisors would advance the progress of their research by securing assistance from dedicated students (Strike et al., 2002). With time, I began to realize that the relationship between a research supervisor and an RA is not always a fair collaboration (Niemczyk & Hodson, 2008). Consequently, I began to question some aspects of my experiences and their contribution to my development as a researcher.

My involvement in bi-epistemic research projects—Aboriginal and mainstream—made me realize that knowledge is a social construction and some forms of knowledge have more power and legitimacy than others. As McLaren (2009) explained, socially constructed knowledge “means that the world we live in is constructed symbolically by the mind through social interaction with others and is heavily dependent on culture, context, custom, and historical specificity” (p. 63). My experience in two diverse cultural

worlds within Canada—Aboriginal and mainstream—was an important educational journey that gave me a greater appreciation and understanding of educational research. In addition, my perception of education outside the communist regime was changing. My initial sense of Canadian schooling as a cultural terrain that promoted student empowerment and transformation was overly simplistic and I began to view schools as sites of both domination and liberation (McLaren, 2009). McLaren argued, “the school functions *simultaneously* as a means of empowering students around the issues of social justice and as a means of sustaining, legitimizing, and reproducing dominant class interests” (p. 62).

The majority of my master’s and especially my doctoral RAships offered opportunities to become an equal decision-maker within the projects, which played a pivotal role in the development of my identity as researcher. Through these experiences, I began to recognize myself as a collaborator rather than solely an assistant to a research supervisor (Harris, Freeman, & Aerni, 2009). I also experienced a different level of connection to and accountability for the projects. Moreover, engaging in international partnerships maximized my understanding of collaboration, mentorship, and reciprocity.

Overall, my part-time experience in master’s studies was unique and favourable as I was employed on multiple part-time research contracts at the university (equating to full-time employment) while pursuing my degree. This allowed me to stay connected to the university community, enhance my research knowledge, and build mentoring relationships. I recognize, however, that students working full time outside their academic environment may feel disconnected from the university community and experience the invisibility factor (Sample, 2010). While my master’s studies were



completed part time, securing federal funding has allowed me to undertake doctoral studies full time and fully devote to my studies (taking courses, researching, writing, participating in conferences and workshops, contributing to service, and developing my professional skills). Based on several conversations with my part-time doctoral colleagues, I learned that they often feel disconnected from the academic community, student social events, and professional-development opportunities. In addition they are excluded from many funding opportunities.

My overall engagement in RAships motivated me to question how these experiences influenced my development as a researcher and made me wonder if my experiences were representative of other students. Based on my part-time and full-time experiences in graduate study as well as conversations with my colleagues, I also began to wonder how institutional regulations and practices might influence graduate student RAs' experiences as a whole.

As evident from my positioning, I am familiar with the community under investigation. I share some of the characteristics, roles, and experiences with one group of my participants because we are all doctoral students in Education. However, I am also an outsider to some of their experiences, which emerge from different locations in terms of gender, age, marital status, cultural background, and other features. Further, I am an outsider to the other two groups of participants in my study: research supervisors and administrators. To that end, I identify as both, an *insider* and an *outsider* to the experiences of my participants.

My position as an insider is based on my first-hand experience as a graduate student (part-time student throughout my master's studies and full-time student during my

doctoral program) and an RA. I also share some of my participants' social locations (e.g., European Canadian heritage, female gender, parenthood). As an insider, I was able to connect with my participants, gain their acceptance and a certain level of trust more than an outsider, which reflects the argument of Corbin Dwyer and Buckle (2009) that "insider role status frequently allows researchers more rapid and more complete acceptance by their participants. Therefore, participants are typically more open with [insider] researchers so that there may be a greater depth to the data gathered" (p. 58). It was evident in the interviews that doctoral students felt I could relate to their experiences and comprehend them at a deeper level than an outsider. Based on their comments, I deduced that because of our common space they were willing to share detailed, often sensitive accounts of their RAships.

I am also aware of the drawbacks of my insider's position, which may unduly create a level of subjectivity that influences my interpretations of the collected data. I am aware that assumptions I have developed over time may shape my views about RAships. I agree with P. Rose (1985) who argued, "There is no neutrality [in researcher's positioning]. There is only greater or less awareness of one's biases. And if you do not appreciate the force of what you're leaving out, you are not fully in command of what you're doing" (p. 77). To address my insider position and potential biases, I came to the interviews from a neutral perspective in terms of an honest interest to learn about participants' experiences. During the interviews, I asked for clarifications when unsure, paraphrased responses to obtain full understanding, and avoided interjecting my experiences or my opinions about the topics explored. After transcribing the interviews, I employed member checking with the intention to avoid relying on my assumptions. During the interpretation and analysis

process, I adopted a critical lens and paid close attention to my decision-making process in terms of my choices regarding what is important to analyze or report and what to include or exclude in my interpretations.

As explained by Corbin Dwyer and Buckle (2009),

There are costs and benefits to be weighed regarding the insider versus outsider status of the researcher. Being an insider might raise issues of undue influence of the researcher's perspective, but being an outsider does not create immunity to the influence of personal perspective. (p. 59)

Reflecting upon my insider and outsider position, I came to the conclusion that recognizing the existence of my assumptions and paying close attention to my decision-making process were key to conducting authentic and ethical research. Further, the essential elements of my researcher's position included (a) a deep and genuine interest in the experiences of the participants and (b) a commitment to represent their accounts accurately.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Merriam (1998) explained that "the theoretical framework is derived from the orientation or stance that you bring to your study. It is the structure, the scaffolding, the frame of your study" (p. 45). My personal standpoint on research practice stems from a desire to explore and understand the world through active participation. My graduate education has provided me with a unique opportunity to move toward the idea of researching and exploring for meaning rather than being in the position of a passive participant and observer. My active involvement in the research community and in

RAships influenced the theoretical framework I selected, which is informed by a social practice perspective on learning as posited by Lave and Wenger (1991).

Lave and Wenger (1991) argued that learning is a process of participation in communities of practice; they emphasized the whole person and situated learning in certain forms of social participation:

As an aspect of social practice, learning involves the whole person; it implies not only a relation to specific activities, but a relation to social communities . . . .

Activities, tasks, functions, and understandings do not exist in isolation; they are part of broader systems of relations in which they have meaning. These systems of relations arise out of and are reproduced and developed within social communities, which are in part systems of relations among persons. (p. 53)

Lave and Wenger's interest resides in understanding what kinds of social engagements provide the right context for learning to occur. In his foreword to their work, Hanks (1991) observed that social engagement allows learners to acquire knowledge and skills through hands-on activities:

On the one hand, [social engagement] implies a highly interactive and productive role for the skills that are acquired through the learning process. The individual learner is not gaining a discrete body of abstract knowledge which (s)he will then transport and reapply in later context. Instead, (s)he acquires the skills to perform by actually engaging in the process, under the attenuated conditions of *legitimate peripheral participation*. (p. 14)

Lave and Wenger portrayed legitimate peripheral participation as a particular way of engagement whereby a learner participates in the actual practice of an expert, though

only to a limited degree initially and with limited responsibility for the final result. Legitimate peripheral participation refers to the process by which newcomers become part of a community of practice and eventually become full participants. Recognizing legitimate peripheral participation in my study thus encompasses RAships as potential educational venues for developing future researchers. Doctoral RAs working alongside experienced research supervisors may have opportunities to become part of a research community. Through collaborative engagement in research and the shared construction of knowledge, students can engage in learning research skills and generating intellectual capital but most importantly, they can begin the transformation toward becoming independent researchers. McGinn (2006) stated that research team members “have opportunities to learn and adopt new self-identities through participation together in research” (p. 131).

The concept of legitimate peripheral participation may at first appear as a straightforward interactive process leading toward fuller participation for newcomers within a specific community of practice; however, complex social relations and practices influence opportunities for legitimate peripheral participation. In fact, because of complexities and multileveled relations within the sociocultural context, the potential for legitimate peripheral participation within RAships requires careful examination through a critical lens. In particular, attention needs to be directed toward unequal relations of power that place students in vulnerable positions (Hinchey & Kimmel, 2000) and may contribute to their alienation from full participation. As indicated by Bates and Goff (2012), part-time students may feel isolated from their doctoral programs, which in turn may affect their identity formation as researchers and their perceptions of their

membership in a research community. It is important to note that students' influence of isolation may be a result of social interactions as well as a byproduct of programmatic organizational structures.

Learning in a community through observation and interaction with others, as well as the implied identity development through acquiring new knowledge, relates to Clandinin and Connelly's (1995) notion of "knowing-in-action." According to Clandinin and Connelly, "the possibilities for reflective awakenings and transformations are limited when one is alone" (p. 13). Wenger (1998) wrote that learning is not a separate activity but a process that is embedded in practice and in the activities of a given community: "For individuals . . . learning is an issue of engaging in and contributing to the practice of communities," and for communities, "learning is an issue of refining their practice and ensuring new generations of members" (p. 7). Doctoral students develop their identities as researchers by engaging in research communities and doing research. They need opportunities to acquire a sense of belonging to scholarly communities (Pyhäntö, Stubb, & Lonka, 2009) and see themselves as researchers (McGinn & Pollon, 2004).

Considering that participation in social practice is the fundamental form of learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991), it is essential to acquire a better understanding of the organizational characteristics of RAs (i.e., the structures of access, distribution, and coordination of participation) and the ways these characteristics influence the circulation of research knowledge and skills and the overall experiences of doctoral RAs. The research methods section provides detailed information about the processes employed in this study to gain such understandings.

As Lave and Wenger (1991) stated, “The key to legitimate peripherality is access by newcomers to the community of practice and all that membership entails” (p. 100). RAships may provide access “to a wide range of ongoing activity, old-timers, and other members of the community; and to information, resources, and opportunities for participation” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 101). Yet, the organization of access and distribution of RAships dictated by institutional regulations depend on students’ status and other factors, which may promote, prevent, or limit legitimate peripheral participation.

### **Organization of the Document**

This first chapter has outlined the purpose and theoretical framework of this study as well as my positioning as a researcher. Chapter Two consists of a literature review presented in three subsections describing (a) the evolving global and national research landscape that shapes the research environment in higher education institutions, (b) RAships as research learning venues, and (c) part-time students’ status within doctoral studies in comparison to full-time students. Chapter Three provides a full explanation of the case-within-a-case-study research design, participant selection and ethical considerations, data collection, and data analysis employed in this dissertation. Chapter Four provides the context for the case of RAships. Chapters Five and Six thoroughly describe the two subcases of RAships for full-time and for part-time doctoral students. Chapter Seven represents the overarching case discussing similarities and differences within and across the two subcases and provides new ways of understanding how RAships are enacted and interpreted in the specific program at the selected institution at

this point in time. Chapter Eight concludes the dissertation with a discussion of the findings, contributions, and recommendations.



## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

This literature review is divided into three subsections in order to provide background to the proposed case-within-a-case study. The first section describes the evolving global and national research landscape that shapes the research environment in higher education institutions. I find it necessary to provide background information about the evolving research landscape to emphasize universities' growing roles in the knowledge-based economy and the associated expectations for higher education to produce highly skilled researchers. The second section brings attention to the importance of RAships as research learning venues and illustrates the need for more research about this understudied area. The third section sheds light on the relevance of students' status. The purpose of this third section is to present part-time students' status within doctoral studies in comparison to full-time students. Both groups, regardless of their student status, are newcomers to a research community; however, their presumed legitimate peripherality within their research community is shaped and conditioned by different institutional regulations, informal practices, and social relations. This third section also brings attention to other factors (e.g., cultural background, gender, parenthood) that may influence students' RAship experiences and their legitimate peripheral participation.

### **Research Environment**

Developed countries are dedicated to increasing their capacity for innovation. Research and innovation are considered key assets for success in the competitive global economy (AUCC, 2010b). Kehm (2007) described reforms in European higher education and identified globalization as one of the main factors influencing changes in doctoral

education and research training. As part of her conclusion, she argued that generation of knowledge shifted from being curiosity driven to becoming economy driven:

Doctoral education and research training are no longer regarded as exclusively curiosity-driven and as the disinterested pursuit of knowledge. Instead, the generation of new knowledge has become an important strategic resource and economic factor. It thus becomes a commodity and its shape acquires a more utilitarian approach. Policy-makers have begun to be interested in the state of research training and universities have been requested to develop institutional strategies for it. (p. 314)

Globalization, the knowledge economy, and rapid technological changes have transformed the very foundations of Canadian society and have influenced the Canadian research environment. In fact, the pressures of contemporary global economics have reshaped the Canadian economy into a knowledge-based economy. Williams's (2005) analysis of doctoral education in Canada presented globalization in terms of the new economy, the growth of multinational corporations, international mobility, a revolution in communication technology, and intense economic competition worldwide; he argued that "globalization has altered both the context and substance of university education, advanced research and doctoral training" (p. 15).

The innovation strategies proposed by leading funding agencies emphasize the importance of knowledge generation, dissemination, and application for the benefit of Canadians.

The Canadian government has progressively recognized universities as key instruments of national competitiveness in the global knowledge economy. This recognition led the

government to increase its financial investment in university research, which in turn changed the higher education research landscape, resulting in a demand for new tools, new skills, and new approaches to the training of novice researchers. Rae (2005) appropriately captured the idea of the evolving research landscape when he observed that every society transfers skills and abilities from generation to generation, and that the level and breadth of knowledge and skill required in the present society and the current research environment are considerably amplified. The graduate students of today are the research leaders and decision-makers of tomorrow. The future development of Canadian research depends on the creation of new scholars. As such, it is necessary for universities to enhance the research skills of graduate students and to facilitate their identity formation as researchers.

Canada's three main federal funding agencies—the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR); the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada (NSERC); and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC)—are critical in supporting university research (Canadian Association of Graduate Studies, 2012). These agencies play important roles in investing in institutions of higher education where the generation of knowledge and development of new talent occur. Private and federal investments not only generate new knowledge, but also provide the impetus and opportunity to hone the talents and skills of the next generation of Canadian researchers.

Canada's research strategy has undergone significant changes in recent years. The federal government has established new programs and made significant investments to encourage a shift in Canada's research environment, making it more conducive than in

the past to a knowledge-based economy. This shift is evident in SSHRC's (2010) transformation from a granting agency to a "knowledge council" that promotes advanced research education for graduate students who are "leaders of tomorrow." SSHRC is instrumental in supporting research and researchers in the social sciences and humanities, serving mostly university-based researchers and graduate students: "By investing in scholarships, fellowships and research training, SSHRC helps develop Canada's best and brightest scholars and researchers into future leaders" (SSHRC, 2013, p. 4).

As the global landscape continues to evolve to favour knowledge-based economics and innovation, private and public funding although competitive will surely increase the amount of research undertaken at universities. Canada's commitment to advance the global research leadership of Canadian institutions and to invest in Canadian post-secondary institutions to excel globally in research areas resulted in the Canada First Research Excellence Fund with \$1.5 billion in funding (Government of Canada, 2014a). The plan will be administered by SSHRC on behalf of all the granting councils and will be available to all post-secondary institutions on a competitive basis. The funding is meant to support researchers' cutting-edge discoveries and scholarship excellence through helping with costs associated with research activities and infrastructure. David Barnard, the President of the University of Manitoba and Chair of Universities Canada (which at the time was called AUCC), made the following comment regarding funding for university research at a time of restrained economic growth for Canada:

We are extremely pleased that the federal government continues to recognize the pivotal role that universities play in driving Canada's innovation agenda, and this investment demonstrates the confidence that the federal government has in

universities' ability to find solutions to challenges both at home and abroad.

(Berkowitz, 2014, para. 4)

Polster's (2007) study of the nature and implications of research grants in Canadian universities indicated that the Canadian government's financial support for universities validates the value of universities in the global knowledge economy:

Over the last 20 years, the Canadian government (as most governments of western countries) has progressively come to see the university as a key instrument of national competitiveness in the global knowledge economy. Accordingly, it developed a number of policies to help universities fulfil this role, including those that promote investment in targeted research areas, the cultivation of centres of excellence, and the commercialization of academic knowledge. (p. 601)

Similarly, AUCC (2010a) reported that skilled, highly educated people and shared knowledge are critical factors to drive Canada's innovation and productivity. The development of subsequent generations of scholars through graduate programming at universities provides a vital contribution to the knowledge economy (AUCC, 2010b; Evans, 2010). These graduates must be able to apply their knowledge and skills in academic and non-academic settings (Polziehn, 2011).

M. Rose (2012) explained that it is important that graduate students develop professional skills as they complete their graduate studies. She elaborated that "professional skills" include (a) academic skills related to knowledge of a discipline, research prowess, and teaching abilities, and (b) broader transferable competencies such as interpersonal communication, self-management, and self-presentation. Although, academic skills training is a primary focus in supervising graduate students (including

supervision during RAships), these other transferable skills are crucial competencies that graduates will need in their future workplace settings.

M. Rose (2012) is not the only one arguing that Canadian universities should provide students with professional skills training. SSHRC (2014) has recognized the need on the part of universities for professional skills training that goes beyond development of students' disciplinary expertise and to connect to the potential employability in academic and non-academic settings. The Canadian Association for Graduate Studies (CAGS, 2008) emphasized the need for professional skills development for graduate students and supported Rose's argument about the vitality for students to enhance their academic and transferable skills "given the demand for the skilled people needed to thrive in a knowledge-based economy and to make meaningful contributions to society, both nationally and internationally" (p. 8).

Increasing support for graduate students, interdisciplinary linkages between the government of Canada and provincial laboratories, and national and international collaborative research networks complement university learning environments and promote the sharing of new ideas across every sector of the economy. Universities are the only sector to perform research for all other sectors, across the full range of disciplines, and with a significant presence in all regions of Canada (AUCC, 2005).

As part of the Canadian government's effort to strengthen Canada's research in areas that are expected to generate social and economic benefits for Canadians, in 2008 the government launched the Canada Excellence Research Chairs Program. As indicated by the Government of Canada (2014b), the Chair positions were designed to attract the world's top researchers to develop ambitious research programs at universities across the

country. It is important to note that such research programs were assumed to allow space for the involvement of graduate students and thereby contribute to the development of this next generation of researchers.

University graduates and researchers contribute greatly to the creation of new products and services that improve Canadians' everyday lives. CIHR, NSERC, and SSHRC help nurture the strong research environment that allows students to acquire their skills from the best researchers.

### **Research Assistantships**

The evolving research landscape in higher education results in high expectations for graduate students as future researchers. Current research practices encourage new ways of communication within and between research communities, multidisciplinary and international collaborations, and dissemination of research findings to non-research communities. All these transformations call for advanced skills and knowledge novice researchers need to acquire in their doctoral programs. As indicated earlier, the development of students' academic and transferable skills is crucial to prepare competent researchers. These requirements in turn lead to the importance of focusing on research learning venues such as RAships where graduate students have the opportunity to engage in hands-on research.

According to Pearson and Brew (2002), RAships should be beneficial for students and faculty members alike: Students engaged in RAships may have opportunities to gain valuable experience while accumulating research presentations and publications to show for their efforts; in exchange, faculty may benefit from the contributions of dedicated students who enhance their research output.

Developing the research skills of the next generation of researchers is fundamental to an innovative, successful, and well-educated society. Researchers are leaders who are competent and capable to think critically, communicate effectively, and implement ideas productively. Strong social science researchers are needed to face the social changes and challenges of today and tomorrow. Nicolas (2008) described doctoral students as future creators of knowledge and stated, “Researchers-in-the-making are by far the most important ‘vehicles’ for the transfer of university research to society” (p. 10). Miller and Salkind (2002) argued, “There are no shortcuts in becoming a competent researcher. It involves a great deal of time and practice in every sense of the word. An increasing number of experiences in different settings leads to enhanced competence” (p. 15).

There is increasing recognition of the importance of supporting and encouraging students’ development as researchers. According to Strike et al. (2002), research supervisors should commit to the support, welfare, and progress of student researchers during their academic journeys. Moreover, research supervisors have ethical obligations to nurture, provide proper training, and ensure the competence of novice researchers. These standards illustrate research supervisors’ obligations to train and educate doctoral RAs. However, responsibility in the relationship between a research supervisor and an RA is not one sided. Research supervisors are expected to educate students whereas students have responsibilities toward research supervisors and a duty to adhere to the ethical dimensions of research. The limited literature related to RAships comes from the United States, Australia, United Kingdom, and Canada. Researchers across disciplines recognize that RAships have been a neglected area in research education (Edwards, 2009;



Hutchinson & Moran, 2005; Molony & Hammett, 2007; Turner, 2010). Published literature is composed of papers related to (a) benefits of hiring RAs and becoming RAs, (b) mentoring relationships between RAs and professors, and (c) challenges within RAs. A very small collection of writings is rooted in the personal experiences of RAs. Turner (2010) accurately asserted that “a key partner in the research process has been rendered invisible and effectively silenced” (p. 206). Limited research studies report experiences of RAs and provide evidence of the ways their experiences are influenced by factors such as student status and institutional regulations. This dissertation research is meant to address this gap.

Edwards (2009) conducted a qualitative research study that explored RAs’ experiences to gain understanding of students’ motivations, activities, and interactions in RAs. Her results indicated that Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) students undertake RAs for diverse reasons, including securing financial support, taking advantage of opportunities to work with a specific research supervisor, enhancing research productivity, and learning research skills (p. 127). The majority of the students in her study reported being satisfied with their RA experiences and would recommend RAs to other PhD students.

Hutchinson and Moran (2005) discussed advantages and difficulties associated with the employment of undergraduate and graduate RAs. Based on their pilot study involving academic staff at a Law Faculty, they reported that academics found timesaving benefits when assistants (a) helped with tasks such as final editing or conducting electronic searches; (b) provided additional critique; and (c) completed some of the tedious and time-consuming work that freed up their time for other tasks.

Difficulties identified by academics in employing RAs were related to the quality of students' performance, communication issues, and acknowledgement of RAs' contributions. Grundy (2004) provided evidence in her master's thesis that graduate RAs working alongside experienced researchers enhanced their research knowledge and skills, increased their self-confidence, and perceived themselves as part of research communities. Similar results came from my own master's thesis (Niemczyk, 2010), where I explored the perceptions of 7 master's students regarding their experiences as RAs. The findings of my study demonstrated that RAships allowed students to acquire research skills, such as completing research ethics applications, interviewing, transcribing, analyzing data, conducting literature reviews, looking for references, and preparing charts and tables. In addition, some RAs also identified building personal skills, including punctuality, independence, organization, and attention to detail. As reported by students, all these skills helped them with their master's courses and their theses or projects. In fact, RAships are recognized as spaces not only to learn research but also to acquire personal and transferable skills (Ratković, Niemczyk, Trudeau, & McGinn's, 2013). As explained in Ratković et al. (2013), through involvement in a variety of authentic tasks and activities, RAs may gain knowledge and abilities (e.g., prioritizing tasks, negotiating conflict, and networking) that can be transferable across different work environments. Transferable skills acquired through RAship experiences may be valuable for students' graduate work and for their future careers within or outside the academic world. Polziehn (2011) argued that it is important to recognize "that while research skills are essential in an academic pursuit, there are many skills that graduate students can sharpen" (p. 9) during graduate studies. RAships have the potential to

enhance students' diverse skill sets, contribute to the development of their identities as researchers, and thus contribute to their future success.

Scholars across different disciplines (Grenville & Ciuffetelli Parker, 2013; Maher, Gilmore, Feldon & Davis, 2013; McBurnie, 2011; McGinn et al., 2013; Niemczyk, 2010) have provided evidence that the mentorship and support RAs receive from their research supervisors contribute to the students' graduate work and their transition from RAs to researchers. Maher et al. (2013) investigated the research development of eight science and engineering doctoral students serving as RAs. They found that interactions between research supervisors and their RAs were highly influential in students' development of research skills when both parties were fully committed. However, as the authors claimed, research development "does not occur by magic; instead, it requires deliberate action by faculty supervisors and students" (p. 19).

Although the benefits of RAships are evident, RAs may also experience risks and challenges within assistantships. Naufel and Beike (2013) discussed unethical treatment of RAs and showcased that RAs, just as human participants, can be exposed to physical, psychological, and social risks when completing their assigned responsibilities. They proposed a document in the form of an ethics code meant to guide the supervision of RAs.

Hobson, Jones, and Deane (2005) drew attention to the limited recognition of the RA position in knowledge production within Australian universities. According to Hobson et al., RAs represent a low-paid workforce, vulnerable to intellectual exploitation, because ownership and authorship are often subject to informal arrangements and expectations. Similarly, Hutchinson and Moran (2005) argued that RAs

have been an undervalued part of many departments' research cultures and called for thorough training of RAs and thus nurturing of future academic researchers. Niemczyk and Hodson (2008) described RAs' experiences in a Canadian context, indicating that not all RAships are guided well and not all RAs are recognized fairly. With this in mind, it is appropriate to conclude that RAships offer opportunities as well as challenges for RAs.

### **Academic Status of Doctoral Students**

AUCC (2011) reported that doctoral student enrolments have increased substantially and there are more full-time students than part-time students pursuing doctoral education in Canada. The highest proportion of part-time doctoral students is in Education (21%) where many students are working teachers and educational administrators. In all other disciplines, the proportion of part-time doctoral students is 10% or less (Leyton-Brown, 2008). Based on the analysis conducted by Wiggers, Lennon, and Frank (2011), in the past decade, doctoral degree enrolment in Canada has increased by 61% (67% in Ontario) and so has the enrolment of part-time doctoral students.

Factors contributing to enrolment growth are related to the recognition of universities as key instruments of national competitiveness in the global knowledge economy, rapid development of new graduate programs, and research support from the federal and provincial governments. "Through the three federal research granting councils, sponsored research investments more than doubled between 2000 and 2010, providing additional funding for graduate students in the form of new and expanded scholarship programs, and through increases in research grant programs" (AUCC, 2011,

p. 10). It is important to recognize that the majority of student funding resources are available to full-time students only.

Today's students come to doctoral programs with increasingly varied backgrounds, professional experience, responsibilities, and expectations. Williams (2005) reported that Canadian part-time doctoral students in Education frequently have a history of professional experience and thus tend to be older than students in other disciplines. Pearson, Evans, and Macauley (2004, p. 348) stated that it is common for full-time doctoral candidates to combine their graduate work with work as RAs, lecturers, or tutors within universities. Meanwhile, most part-time students are already employed in careers, often as university staff seeking to improve their qualifications or in senior positions outside universities.

Several universities in Canada offer professional doctorate programs as a complement to the more traditional PhDs. As M. Rose, McIntosh, and Junke (2011, p. 2) explained, PhD programs are designed to equip candidates to be researchers whereas professional doctorate programs are focused on applying knowledge in workplaces, particularly in professional practice. Considering that the current study relates closely to doctoral students' development as researchers, I chose to focus on a PhD program. The majority of PhD programs require that students be registered full time; however, some universities offer PhD programs that allow students to complete their degrees on a part-time basis (Saliba, 2012). The completion timelines are generally more flexible for part-time students; however, they are expected to follow the same curriculum as full-time students.

Regulations governing the status of full-time students are fairly straightforward. Students are typically expected to dedicate their full-time energies to their graduate programs, visit campus regularly, and make full-time progress towards the completion of their graduate degrees. Although, university-related employment (e.g., RAships or teaching assistantships) is assumed to be beneficial for students, the maximum acceptable employment time for full-time graduate students in Ontario is an average of 10 hours per week. Regulations for national scholarships from the federal granting agencies and for Ontario Graduate Scholarships incorporate versions of the 10-hour rule. This regulation is also represented in Council of Ontario Universities (2013) policy:

[University-related employment] may provide a significant portion of the financial support that enables a graduate student to pursue graduate study, and may provide experience that supplements the formal academic program in developing skills relevant to a future faculty position or other career: However, too much time spent on employment activities often diverts time and energy from the program of study and research, and delays completion. (para. 1)

Literature about part-time graduate studies is seldom explicit when defining what exactly constitutes part-time study. Rodwell and Neumann (2008) referred to part-time status in terms of half-time engagement in comparison to a full-time course of study. Moro-Egido and Panades (2010) defined part-time students by how many hours they were employed full time or by how many courses they could enrol in at a specific time. In addition, some reports accounted collectively for all graduate students, disregarding differences between part-time and full-time students for the reporting purposes (e.g., Barnacle & Usher, 2003; Rodwell & Neumann, 2008). Considering the fact that full-time

and part-time doctoral students are expected to follow different regulations, it seems inaccurate to present them as a homogenous group. In addition, it should also be noted that neither part-time nor full-time students represent unitary groups since personal circumstances and support needs are highly individual (Watts, 2008).

Several factors can shape and contribute to doctoral students' experiences and their engagement in a community of practice. Gardner (2008) reported on the socialization experience of 40 doctoral students and their transition to independence through the graduate school process. The results showed that the relationships formed and the understandings gleaned from their experiences (such as RAships) are integral to students' success in their programs and future success in their particular disciplines. On a similar note, Bayley, Ellis, Abreu-Ellis, and O'Reilly (2012) explored recent graduates' experiences of their doctoral studies in Education and found that participants valued being able to immerse themselves in the academic environment and to belong to a "community of learners" (p. 94). Some participants considered interactions with like-minded intellectuals, collaboration with colleagues, participation at conferences, and opportunities to work at the university as particularly enriching experiences. Full-time status compared to part-time status tends to allow doctoral students more active involvement in the university community as well as research communities beyond the university environment. Engagement in these enriching experiences may be less accessible for part-time students.

Bates and Goff (2012) reported that their distance from the university and their personal location within the institutional order as part-time students highly affected their motivations, needs, challenges, and overall first-year experiences in a doctoral program.

They reported beneficial aspects of pursuing part-time doctoral studies. For instance, part-time status allowed them greater flexibility in terms of when and where reading and research took place. Moreover they were able to align their doctoral research and employment practice so that research and work informed each other. They voiced some of the challenges they encountered. Managing time and juggling diverse responsibilities such as family, work, and personal roles were on the top of their lists, followed by a lack of financial support for part-time students (specifically, the absence of internal support for tuition and ineligibility for funding from external granting agencies). One of the authors reported feeling continually challenged to juggle her family life, full-time work, and part-time studies: “With a four-year old son at home, she recognizes the need for balance to ensure that her family’s needs are met without sacrificing quality in the work she does for work and for school” (p. 374). Bates and Goff also identified that working full time limited their face-to-face contact with faculty, staff, and colleagues and reduced their participation and presence at conferences, meetings, and defences. Their limited participation in university life made them feel invisible and isolated from their university.

Literature showcased that part-time students’ contact with their universities can be very limited (Deem & Brehony, 2000; Sample, 2010) and thus they may struggle to feel part of the university culture. Part-time students have been called “the forgotten cohort” (Barnacle & Usher, 2003) and “invisible research students” (Neumann & Rodwell, 2009). Watts (2009) asserted that the issues of distance and the presence of part-time doctoral students highly influence their overall experiences in the program. To that end, Teeuwssen, Ratković, and Tilley (2012) described the ways two doctoral students identified with and connected to the academic community and how their participation



was influenced by their part-time student status. The authors reported that although as part-time students they strived to become part of the university culture, they often felt like strangers to the context due to their distance from and disconnection with the university. Their part-time status limited their participation in the university and their identity development as scholars. They explained, “Access to research experience is particularly important for part-time doctoral students in education who have limited connection to the research world but need to build their research capacity to pursue an academic career” (p. 3). They also voiced their doubt about whether part-time students, no matter how accomplished, could ever be seen as full participants in their university or they would always be identified or self-identify as peripheral and less competent participants than full-time students. Teeuwssen et al. (2012) brought attention to another factor that made one of the students feel at the periphery of the community of scholars. Despite having engaged in several research projects, she questioned her legitimate location due to her limited writing and publishing experience:

Snežana was rarely involved in writing and publishing when she worked in her research assistant capacity. She wondered if this was the case due to the nature of her research assistantships, or because she was a refugee woman whose mother tongue was other than English, and likely perceived as someone unable to write a strong academic article in the English language. She wondered if she would be ever able, and allowed, to prove this perception wrong and enter the ivory tower of the English word. She understood her limitations but believed that she would be able to develop the academic writing skills she needed by working alongside more experienced writers. (p. 10)

Teeuwssen et al. (2012) recommended that higher consideration should be given to supporting part-time students and increasing their level of participation. They argued, “The lack of assistance for part-time students can be read and understood as a lack of institutional interest in supporting part-time students’ scholarly activities, [which is] an equity issue in graduate education” (p. 13).

This section illustrates that students’ status and other demographic factors do influence doctoral students’ perceptions of belonging to a community of practice and becoming legitimate participants in that community. Opportunities for social co-participation are differently distributed and made accessible to part-time and full-time students. Building research capacity definitely requires students’ time and commitment, but also depends on support systems that facilitate their participation in research learning venues. As evident in the literature, part-time students may feel not only isolated and distanced but also constrained by institutional regulations and funding limitations. Part-time students’ realities pose questions about how regulations and practices influence students’ legitimate peripheral participation in a research community and which regulations and practices push part-time doctoral students to the remote periphery.

### **Summary**

This chapter illustrated scholarly literature relevant to understanding the research environment in higher education, RAships, and the position of full-time and part-time doctoral students. I return to this literature in my analysis and discussion of the case and subcases. In the following chapter, I describe the research design and research methods that I adopted to explore the case of RAships for full-time and part-time doctoral students in Education at an Ontario university.

### CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODS

The research design employed in this research is a qualitative *case-within-a-case* study (Gondo, Amis, & Vardaman, 2009). Merriam (1998) stated that a “qualitative case study can be defined as an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single entity, phenomenon, or social unit. Case studies are particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic and rely heavily on inductive reasoning in handling multiple data sources” (p. 16). The case in this study (see Figure 1) is the RAships in doctoral education in one program in one field at one Ontario institution at a specific period of time. As Creswell (2011) explained, a case study is an in-depth exploration of a bounded system based on extensive data collection of multiple sources, where “bounded means that the case is separated out for research in terms of time, place, or some physical boundaries” (p. 465).

Gondo, Amis, and Vardaman (2009) explained the case-within-a-case-study research design as follows:

This research design involves dividing a larger phenomenon of interest (the case) into a subset of smaller meaningful units (subcases). These subcases can then be used to compare both similarities and differences within and across the subcases in order to glean insight into the larger phenomenon of interest. (p. 135)

Scholars in diverse fields such as politics (Kent, 2002), health care (Ferlie, Fitzgerald, Wood, & Hawkins, 2005), and law (Oddi, 2012) have employed case-within-a-case research strategies to provide in-depth understandings of diverse phenomena. Dividing a single case into subcases allowed these scholars to produce rich data from each subset, conduct thematic analyses within and across the subcases, and examine the subcases within the larger case.

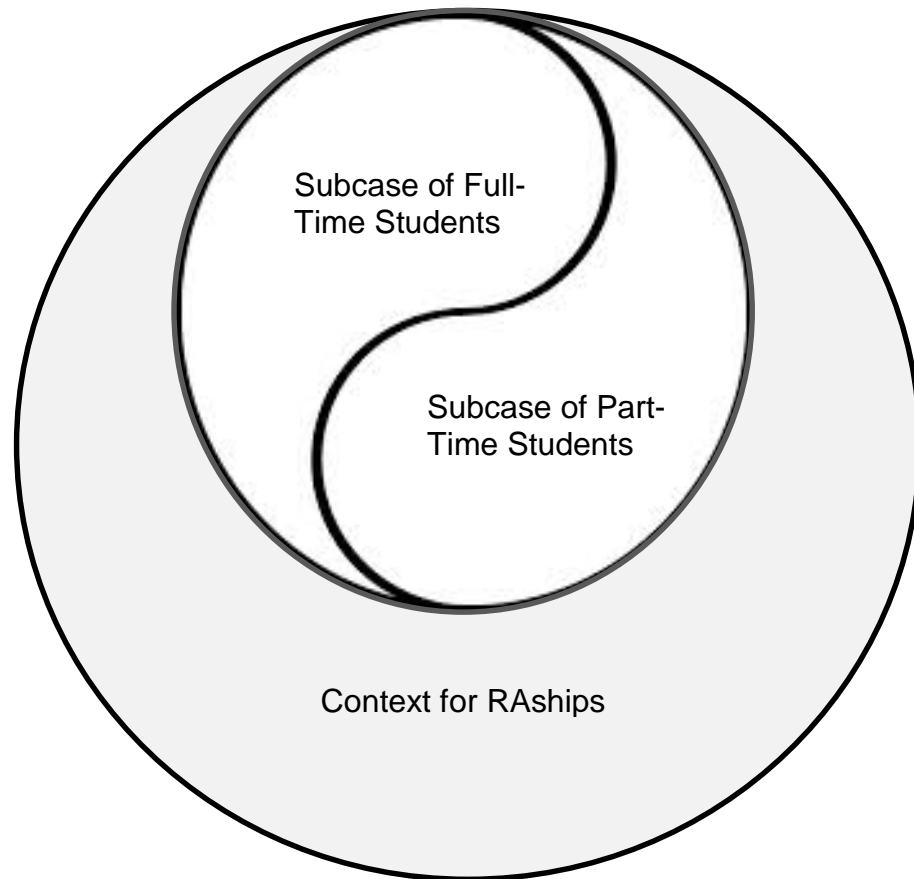


Figure 1.

*A Case of Research Assistantships for Full-Time and Part-Time Doctoral Students in Education*

The case-within-a-case research strategy allowed me to present the case of RAships for doctoral students with respect to two separate subcases: full-time and part-time students. Discovering similarities and differences within and across these two groups (the subcases) provided new ways of understanding how RAships are enacted and interpreted at this site. Figure 1 illustrates this case of RAships for Education doctoral students. The overarching case includes the context for RAships (Chapter Four), the subcase of RAships for full-time doctoral students (Chapter Five), and the subcase of RAships for part-time doctoral students (Chapter Six). The intertwined format of Figure 1 is intended to show that the overarching case draws on all these components. The overarching case is presented in full in Chapter Seven.

### **Participant Selection and Ethical Considerations**

As stated earlier, selection of the site was narrowed to one specific field at an Ontario university in order to acquire a thorough understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. I chose this specific Education PhD program because it is one of a few programs permitting students to complete their studies on a part-time or full-time basis. This was a fundamental factor in selecting the site due to the purpose of my study and my focus on students' status.

This research is framed as a case-within-a-case study of doctoral RAships. This case study involved semi-structured interviews with doctoral students, research supervisors, and administrators from a Faculty of Education at an Ontario university, as well as document analysis. Considering that the “the methods and sources should be chosen based on their ability to provide insights into the phenomenon of interest” (Gondo, Amis, & Vardaman, 2009, p. 135), participants were recruited through maximal

variation sampling. As indicated by Creswell (2011), this sampling strategy is meant to build complexity into the research when sampling participants or sites. This purposeful sampling aligned with my intention to develop many perspectives and a detailed understanding through recruitment of doctoral students that differ in terms of study status, research supervisors who work with doctoral RAs, and administrators directly involved in the organization and distribution of RAs.

After securing research ethics clearance (file number 13-001 McGINN), I engaged in recruitment. First, I asked the Administrative Assistant responsible for the doctoral program to send a brief electronic invitation on my behalf to all doctoral students. The message included eligibility criteria as well as contact information for those interested in participating in my study. To increase the response rate, I also (a) sent invitation letters to colleagues who may want to contribute to my research study and (b) asked research supervisors to forward invitation letters to their doctoral students on my behalf. Taking into consideration my preliminary literature review on doctoral students' status, I considered the possibility of not recruiting a desired number of part-time students who have experienced RAs. Thus, I extended the invitation to participate in my study as well to doctoral part-time students (and for comparison reasons to full-time students) who would like to share with me why they have not engaged in RAs. The voices of these students provided valuable insights for this case study. Eligible students interested in participating in the study contacted me via email (as indicated in the letter of invitation). Next, I sent personal invitations to research supervisors and administrators using contact information from the university website.

These recruitment steps resulted in the participation of 13 doctoral students (4 full-time students with and 4 full-time students without RAships and 2 part-time students with and 3 part-time students without RAships), five research supervisors, and two administrators from a Faculty of Education at an Ontario university. Consistent with the typical demographics in Education, women were overrepresented in the three participants groups: students (10 women and 3 men), research supervisors (3 women and 2 men), and administrators (2 women). Table 1 provides demographic information about the four doctoral student participant groups. I did not gather other demographic information from research supervisors or administrators because the main focus of this investigation was doctoral students' research assistant experiences. I intended my interviews with research supervisors and administrators to uncover their perceptions about doctoral students rather than emphasize information about themselves.

My ongoing commitment was to engage in respectful and ethical research practices. It was essential for the thorough exploration of this case study that participants felt protected in order to reveal their personal experiences and perceptions. For that reason, to increase the protection of individual participants and their identities, I have not used pseudonyms to trace individual participant comments throughout the document nor have I cited or identified institutional documents by name. This is a case study of Education doctoral research assistantships at this research site. The collective experiences of doctoral students are the primary focus of this investigation, not the individual research participants who engaged in interviews to help me understand the collective experiences.

My participants were invited to the study on a voluntary basis and were notified of their right to withdraw from the study at any time during the research process.

Table 1

*Doctoral Students' Demographics*

| Full-time students                |                                   | Part-time students                |                                   |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| With RAship                       | Without RAship                    | With RAship                       | Without RAship                    |
| Gender                            |                                   |                                   |                                   |
| – 3 women                         | – 2 women                         | – 2 women                         | – 3 women                         |
| – 1 man                           | – 2 men                           | – 0 men                           | – 0 men                           |
| Year of study                     |                                   |                                   |                                   |
| – 1 in 3rd year                   | – 3 in 2nd year                   | – 1 in 5th year                   | – 1 in 3rd year                   |
| – 1 in 4th year                   | – 1 in 4th year                   | – 1 graduated                     | – 1 in 4th year                   |
| – 2 in 5th year                   |                                   | within past 2<br>years            | – 1 in 6th year                   |
| Relationship status               |                                   |                                   |                                   |
| – 4 in committed<br>relationships | – 4 in committed<br>relationships | – 2 in committed<br>relationships | – 3 in committed<br>relationships |
| Children                          |                                   |                                   |                                   |
| – 2 with children                 | – 3 with children                 | – 1 with children                 | – 2 with children                 |
| – 2 no children                   | – 1 no children                   | – 1 no children                   | – 1 no children                   |



In agreement with the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* (CIHR, NSERC, & SSHRC, 2014) and the ethical standards of the American Educational Research Association (American Educational Research Association, 2011; Strike et al., 2002), participants were also notified about the benefits and risks of the study in order to make an informed decision about participation.

The possible benefits of participation included the opportunity for participants to share their experiences, express their thoughts and concerns regarding RAships, and learn from the research findings. Identified potential risks were mainly for doctoral students whose experiences may have been negative; therefore, they might feel some discomfort when discussing certain aspects of their experience. I was prepared, according to the individual situation, to mitigate any participant's potential discomfort by changing the direction of the conversation, proposing a break, and directing individuals to relevant university policies and appropriate resources and supports. However, there was no need for any of the above-mentioned strategies as none of my participants experienced evident discomfort.

### **Data Collection**

As Gondo, Amis, and Vardaman (2009) explained, data collection for case-within-a-case-study design is “similar to a single case study in that data can be collected from multiple sources using multiple methods. Different forms of data that are often used include interviews, observations, historical archives, surveys, official documents, and popular press articles” (p. 135). The authors further explained that although it is useful to make initial decisions regarding data sources, “it is also important to remain flexible to allow the pursuit of new data sources and questions as contextual understanding

increases” (p. 135). My data collection ensured that the same sources and methods were used for both subcases.

Through personal interviews with three groups of participants—doctoral students, research supervisors, and administrators—I investigated part-time and full-time doctoral students’ experiences as RAs. The interview data were complemented by university documents pertaining to RAships. Noor (2008) stated that a case study is “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context using multiple sources of evidence” (p. 1602). These multiple forms of data allowed me to critically examine RAships and identify relevant theoretical and practical implications. In order to provide a context for this case, I analyzed relevant documents pertaining to the doctoral program offered by this Ontario university (e.g., enrolment data, funding for RAships). Yin (2012) explained, “Examining the context and other complex conditions related to the case being studied are integral to understanding the case” (p. 4).

This case-within-a-case study involved semi-structured interviews with 13 doctoral students (8 full-time and 5 part-time students), five research supervisors, and two administrators from a Faculty of Education at an Ontario university. I considered data saturation (a point in data collection when interviews are no longer providing new or relevant information) in order to decide when a satisfactory number of interviews had been completed (Saumure & Given, 2008).

I conducted one personal interview with each doctoral student (10 women and 3 men; 8 full-time and 5 part-time): 6 students had worked as RAs, whereas 7 students had not considered or had decided not to engage in RAships. Two of the doctoral students commenced their program as full-time students but later switched to part-time status due

to family circumstances. I classified these two participants within the pool of full-time students with RA experiences based on the fact that during their RAships they were full-time students and their interview responses focused on that period of their studies.

Following my criteria for selecting participants, doctoral students were at least in their second year of the program or had graduated from the program no longer than two years ago. The interview questions were sent to all individuals in advance to allow time for reflection. For those with an RA experience, the interviews were up to two hours long (Appendix A). The first part of the interviews focused on students' research knowledge and skills acquisition, including the development of their identities as researchers. The interview questions encouraged RAs to reflect on their roles and responsibilities as RAs, relationships with their research supervisors, and benefits and challenges within their RAships. The second part of the interviews explored students' perceptions about access to and distribution of RAships. They were asked to identify how (if) their student status (and other factors) influenced their decisions, relations, and experiences. In addition, I asked them to identify documents or practices that might have influenced the experiences they reported. The interviews with students who had not engaged in RAships were shorter (up to 1 hour). I asked these students to describe why they did not consider or decided not to engage in RAships, what they thought about the organization and distribution of RAships, and how they would enhance RAships as research education spaces (Appendix B).

The second group of participants with whom I conducted individual semi-structured interviews consisted of five research supervisors (3 women and 2 men) from the Faculty of Education (Appendix C). Recruited research supervisors had worked with

RAs and were asked to contribute information regarding benefits and challenges of working with RAs, practices employed in selecting RAs, expectations of RAs, and documents guiding their RAs. The interviews were approximately one hour long. Data collected by interviewing research supervisors were meant to complement data gathered from doctoral students (full time and part time) and build toward a comprehensive understanding of RAs.

As a third group of participants, I interviewed two administrators (2 women) from the Faculty of Education to understand the regulations, practices, relations, and support structures available to full-time and part-time doctoral RAs (Appendix D). The interview with each administrator was approximately one hour long. This part of data collection was crucial in providing information about the ways RAs are carried out and managed. The two interviews also provided space to explore administrators' relations, and support structures associated with RAs and areas for improvement.

Throughout the interviews, I asked open-ended questions, which were meant to serve as stimuli for reflection, more so than structured question-and-answer exchanges. I focused on the research topic, yet created space for participants' voices without being constrained by a fixed agenda. I employed informal verbal member checking by paraphrasing and summarizing during each interview in order to verify my understandings of the information acquired from each participant. With permission from my participants, I audio recorded all interviews and then transcribed them verbatim. At the conclusion of each transcribed interview, I forwarded the transcript to the participant who then had the opportunity to verify its accuracy and to withdraw or volunteer additional information. All participants, except one, responded to the member check

request, in some instances adding additional information for clarification. Harrison, MacGibbon, and Morton (2001) describe member checking as a method of ensuring transcripts' trustworthiness.

In addition to personal interviews, I reviewed and analyzed documents reflecting the university's regulations and practices pertaining to RAships. I located these documents through searches of department and institutional websites. The analyzed documents included four university documents, three Faculty documents, one program document, and three external documents. The length of the documents varied from 4 to 60 pages; however, I analyzed only the parts of the documents relevant to the objectives of this research, which in total amounted to 57 pages. The role of these data was to augment and corroborate evidence from other data sources (Yin, 2012) as well as provide context for the two subcases and the overarching case.

### **Data Analysis**

The extent and complexity of the data collected for this study required careful and critical analysis. "Analyzing data requires us to critically examine information, look for patterns, and challenge the obvious; therefore, we must be flexible yet systematic in our thinking" (Merritt, 2004, p. 407). After member checks, I imported the interview transcripts along with the documents into NVivo software to facilitate systematic data analysis. Miller and Salkind (2002) explained that qualitative data analysis software enables researchers "to systematically analyze text or image files, categorize and code information, build descriptions and themes, sort and locate important data segments, and provide visual display of codes and categories" (p. 164).

The analysis was treated as an ongoing process (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Transcribing the interviews and reading the documents served as a preliminary exploratory analysis that allowed me to acquire a general sense of data (Creswell, 2011). Then, I used an inductive approach going from detailed data (transcribed interviews and documents) to general codes and themes. In order to organize data sources within NVivo, I created separate folders for each data set (full-time students, part-time students, research supervisors, administrators, documents).

Before commencing to code data sources, I prepared a list of a priori codes for each data set based on my research objectives and interview questions. I began by creating a priori codes for doctoral students since their experiences were at the core of this study. As I was recording new topics verbalized by the students in each interview, I gradually added the emerging codes to the list of a priori codes. After coding all 13 interviews with the doctoral students (8 full time and 5 part time), I had a list of 33 codes, including 20 a priori codes and 13 emerging codes (see Table 2).

In order to achieve a more manageable set of themes for in-depth analysis, I grouped comparable codes and unique codes for each subcase. For example, reviewing codes, I recognized that the a priori code “development through RAships” in most cases described the opportunities doctoral students encountered within RAships that contributed to their growth as researchers, therefore I grouped this code with another a priori code “opportunities within RAships.” This code ultimately was refined under the *Benefits of Working as Research Assistants* theme. As another example, I noticed that ideas discussed by students in an emerging code “power dynamics” referred to students’ relationships with their research supervisors thus I merged this code with a priori code

Table 2

*A Priori and Emerging Codes for Doctoral Students*


---

| <b><i>A PRIORI CODES</i></b> |  |
|------------------------------|--|
| <hr/>                        |  |
| 1                            | Access to RAships  |
| 2                            | Challenges within RAships  |
| 3                            | Development through RAships  |
| 4                            | Ethical and educational RAships  |
| 5                            | Future RAships   |
| 6                            | General description of RAships (when, where, how many, how long)                 |
| 7                            | Impact of full-time status on (or lack of) access to and experience with RAships |
| 8                            | Impact of part-time status on (or lack of) access to and experience with RAships |
| 9                            | Opportunities within RAships   |
| 10                           | Other factors impact on (or lack of) access to and experiences with RAships      |
| 11                           | Overall RA experience  |
| 12                           | Practices and regulations re: RAships  |
| 13                           | Recommendations  |
| 14                           | Relationship with other team members   |
| 15                           | Relationship with research supervisors   |
| 16                           | Self-identification  |
| 17                           | Why becoming RA  |
| 18                           | Why not becoming RA  |
| 19                           | Why studying full time   |
| 20                           | Why studying part time   |

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(continued)

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***EMERGING CODES***

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- 1 Access to resources and resource people
  - 2 Constructed assumptions and feelings
  - 3 Documents influencing RA experience
  - 4 Expectations from RAships
  - 5 From full time to part time
  - 6 Interest in research
  - 7 Power dynamics
  - 8 RAships as financial support
  - 9 RAships as training
  - 10 RA community (or lack of it)
  - 11 Residency period
  - 12 Defining term RA
  - 13 Value of RAships (for those with no RAships)
-



“relationships with supervisors,” which became the theme *Relationships with Research Supervisors*. This form of logic was followed for all the codes in the data analysis.

The transition process from 33 codes to 12 final themes was time consuming because it required me to retrieve from NVivo all the data specific to each code, identify comparable information, and amalgamate the ideas across codes. As a result, I developed 12 themes (see Table 3) for each subcase, which are explored in Chapters Five and Six.

Analyzing the data set collected from interviews with doctoral students led me to develop the 12 final themes, which then served as a blueprint for analyzing subsequent data sets (see Table 4). In terms of data collected from the interviews with research supervisors, I first created a priori codes driven by the research objectives and interview questions. Then as I read through each research supervisor’s transcript, I identified new ideas and gradually added new emerging codes. After coding all five transcribed interviews, I gathered a list of 19 codes, including 12 a priori codes and 7 emerging codes (see Table 5). At this point, I reviewed all the codes, grouped comparable codes, and then identified those that fit with the final 12 themes from the doctoral students’ transcripts. For example, a priori codes “selections of RAs,” “why hire RAs,” and “access to RAs” were grouped together since they all covered aspects of recruitment of RAs.

Ultimately the ideas shared regarding recruitment were incorporated within the theme *Access to Research Assistantships*. The emerging code “expectations of RAs” was also included in this theme. Research supervisors’ responses regarding recruitment and expectations of RAs provided additional insights into students’ accounts about factors that influenced their access to RAships. I applied a similar process to match the other codes with the final 12 themes.

Table 3

*The Final Themes*


---

|    |   |
|----|---|
| 1  | Students' self-identification                       |
| 2  | Reasons for studying full time or part time         |
| 3  | Access to RAs                                       |
| 4  | Reasons for (not) becoming RAs                      |
| 5  | Engagement in RAs                                   |
| 6  | Benefits of working as RAs                          |
| 7  | Challenges within RAs                               |
| 8  | Relationships with research supervisors             |
| 9  | Educational and ethical RAs                         |
| 10 | Impact of student status (and other factors) on RAs |
| 11 | Regulations and practices specific to RAs           |
| 12 | Participants' recommendations                       |

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Table 4

*From Doctoral Students' Codes to Final Themes*

| Final themes  | A priori codes  | Emerging codes  |
|---|---|---|
| <i>Students' self-identification</i>                  | - Self-identification   | - From full time to part Time   |
| <i>Reasons for studying full time or part time</i>    | - Why studying full time<br>- Why studying part time  |   |
| <i>Access to RAships</i>                              | - Access to RAships   | - Expectations from RAships   |
| <i>Reasons for (not) becoming research assistants</i> | - Why becoming RA<br>- Why not becoming RA  | - Interest in research<br>- RAships as financial support<br>- RAships as training<br>- Value of RAships (for those with no RAships) |
| <i>Engagement in RAships</i>                          | - General description of RAships (when, where, how many, how long)<br>- Overall RA experience |   |
| <i>Benefits of working as research assistants</i>     | - Opportunities within RAships<br>- Development through RAships                               |   |
| <i>Challenges within RAships</i>                      | - Challenges within RAships   | - Constructed assumptions and feelings<br>- RAs community (or lack of it)<br>- Residency period                                     |
| <i>Relationships with research supervisors</i>        | - Relationship with supervisors<br>- Relationship with other team members                     | - Constructed assumptions and feelings<br>- Power dynamics  |

(continued)

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|  |   |  |
|--|---|--|
| <i>Educational and ethical RAships</i>                         | - Ethical and educational RAships   |  |
| <i>Impact of student status (and other factors) on RAships</i> | - Impact of full-time status on (or lack of) access to and experience with RAships<br>- Impact of part-time status on (or lack of) access to and experience with RAships<br>- Other factors impact on (or lack of) access to and experiences with RAships |  |
| <i>Regulations and practices specific to RAships</i>           | - Practices and regulations re: RAships   | - Documents influencing RA experience<br>- Access to resources and resource people |
| <i>Participants' recommendations</i>                           | - Recommendations (on everything, work with supervisors, access to RAships, etc.)   | - Defining term RA   |

---

Table 5

*A Priori and Emerging Codes for Research Supervisors*

| <b><i>A PRIORI CODES</i></b> |   |
|------------------------------|---|
| 1                            | Access to RAs   |
| 2                            | Challenges within RAships   |
| 3                            | Ethical and educational RAships   |
| 4                            | General about RAs (how many?, full time or part time?)                          |
| 5                            | Impact (or importance) of RAs full time or pa                                   |
| 6                            | Meaningful experience for research supervisors                                  |
| 7                            | Meaningful experience for RAs   |
| 8                            | Practice and regulations regarding RAships                                      |
| 9                            | Recommendations   |
| 10                           | Role as a research supervisor (including relationship with RAs)                 |
| 11                           | Selection of RAs  |
| 12                           | Why hire RAs  |
| <b><i>EMERGING CODES</i></b> |   |
| 1                            | Expectations of RAs   |
| 2                            | Funding for RAs   |
| 3                            | Impact of other factors (on RA experience or decision not to undertake RAships) |
| 4                            | Less experienced RAs  |
| 5                            | Overall experience during RAships   |
| 6                            | Power dynamics  |
| 7                            | Defining term RA  |

From the outset of this study, when the interview questions were crafted, I was mindful of the fact that the responses from research supervisors were meant to complement the voices of doctoral students to build a comprehensive understanding of RAships. Therefore, I expected the relative ease that occurred when the majority of codes identified within research supervisors' transcripts aligned with the final themes and complemented data gathered from students.

The same coding process was applied to the transcribed interviews with the 2 administrators. After coding both transcripts, I gathered a list of 17 codes, including 12 a priori codes and 5 emerging codes (see Table 6). After carefully reviewing the codes and grouping the comparable codes, I was able to map the identified codes to the final 12 themes from the student data.

For example, the emerging code "power dynamics" focused on working dynamics between RAs and their research supervisors therefore it fit with the theme *Relationships with Research Supervisors*. Similarly, the emerging code "residency period" provided information about students' access to a research community and RAships and hence fit well with the theme *Access to Research Assistantships*.

The interview questions designed for administrators were meant to complement the voices of doctoral students as well as provide information about the regulations, practices, and support structures available to full-time and part-time doctoral students. The data about the regulations, practices, and support structures informed how RAships were carried out and managed, and enriched Chapter Four providing the context for the RAships case. A priori codes such as "distribution of RAships," "support structures and resources," and "funding for RAs" informed Chapter Four as well as themes explored in

Table 6

*A Priori and Emerging Codes for Administrators*

| <b><i>A PRIORI CODES</i></b> |                                   |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1                            | Benefits of RAships               |
| 2                            | Challenges with RAships           |
| 3                            | Distribution of RAships           |
| 4                            | Ethical and educational RAships   |
| 5                            | Funding for RAs                   |
| 6                            | Impact of student status          |
| 7                            | Impact of other factors           |
| 8                            | Purpose for offering RAships      |
| 9                            | Recommendations                   |
| 10                           | Regulations and documents         |
| 11                           | Support structures and resources  |
| 12                           | Your role with respect to RAships |
| <b><i>EMERGING CODES</i></b> |                                   |
| 1                            | Power dynamics                    |
| 2                            | Record keeping                    |
| 3                            | Residency period                  |
| 4                            | Types of RAships                  |
| 5                            | Who are RAs                       |

the subsequent three chapters. For example, the “distribution of RAs” code complemented students’ responses in themes *Access to Research Assistantships* and *Reasons for (not) Becoming Research Assistants*.

Similar to the analysis of transcribed interviews with administrators, document analysis was meant to provide contextual information to understand and situate the doctoral students’ experiences. I analyzed four university documents, three Faculty documents, one program document, and three external documents. As stated earlier, although I reviewed the entire documents, I analyzed only the parts that were relevant to the objectives of this research.

I entered the documents into NVivo and then coded the relevant sections one by one. For confidentiality purposes, I felt it was important to avoid naming the institution to enhance protection of participants’ identities. Therefore, the institutional documents have not been cited or identified by name. The documents are categorized as university documents, Faculty documents, and program documents. I looked at each document with a critical eye to determine the relevance of each particular section to the research study. Bowen (2009) explained that document analysis involves skimming (superficial examination), reading and re-reading (thorough examination), and interpreting. This process combines elements of content analysis and thematic analysis (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). I engaged in content analysis as a process of organizing information into categories related to the research question. During the thematic analysis, I relied on a priori codes designed based on the information I wished to acquire to contextualize and complement data collected during the interviews. After coding all 11 documents, relying on 14 a priori codes and adding 2 emerging codes, I accumulated a list of 16 codes (see



Table 7). These codes facilitated writing Chapter Four providing the context for the RAships case and complemented the responses from participants in Chapters Five and Six.

As Olson (2010) indicated, document analysis as a research method is particularly applicable to qualitative case studies because documents can provide data about the context within which participants operate. Documents can also help uncover meaning, develop understandings, and discover insights relevant to the research problem (Merriam, 1998, p. 118).

Following the procedures for conducting case-within-a-case study research, after all data sources were coded, I commenced with in-case analysis of each subcase (part-time and full-time students) to gain comprehensive understanding of the subcases. Then, I proceeded with cross-analysis of the subcases to identify similarities and differences. I kept in mind that although “these steps do appear linear, overall the case analysis should be pursued in an iterative fashion where there is a constant comparison between the overall case and the individual subcases” (Gondo, Amis, & Vardaman, 2009, p. 136).

The final themes that emerged from the coding process became the basis for writing the analysis for the subcase of RAships for full-time students (Chapter Five) and the subcase of RAships for part-time students (Chapter Six). I thoroughly described each theme based on the voices of doctoral students, which were complemented by other data sources (interviews with research supervisors, interviews with administrators, and document analysis). Both subcases rely heavily on voices of the participants, which are meant to increase the validity of my interpretations. It is important to note that data

Table 7

*A Priori and Emerging Codes for Documents*

| <b><i>A PRIORI CODES</i></b> |   |
|------------------------------|---|
| 1                            | Access to RAships                             |
| 2                            | Educational and ethical RAships               |
| 3                            | Engagement in RAships                         |
| 4                            | Enrolment in the program                      |
| 5                            | Funding for doctoral students                 |
| 6                            | Funding for RAs                               |
| 7                            | Organization of RAships                       |
| 8                            | Regulations and practices specific to RAships |
| 9                            | Role of the program                           |
| 10                           | Research supervisors                          |
| 11                           | Structure of the program                      |
| 12                           | Student status                                |
| 13                           | Students' right and responsibilities          |
| 14                           | Who are the students                          |
| <b><i>EMERGING CODES</i></b> |   |
| 1                            | Research environment                          |
| 2                            | Research training                             |

collected from doctoral students is based on their personal experiences, perceptions, and assumptions. Some of these assumptions along with their limitations are questioned in the overarching case of RAships for doctoral students (Chapter Seven) and in the discussion and contributions chapter (Chapter Eight). The overarching case describing similarities and differences within and across the two subcases provides fuller thematic analysis in connection to scholarly literature, the context of the case, and the theoretical framework.

Working across the data sets was essential to translate the findings into a meaningful interpretation of each theme. Some of the quotations in the overarching chapter can be repetitive since some of the key quotations from the two subcases are restated to validate the claims. In addition, repetitions were necessary to allow Chapter Seven to stand on its own as a case that has the richness required for a case study.

As evident from the coding process described, the objectives of the study and the interview questions guided data analysis. The theoretical framework of this study, which is informed by a social practice perspective on learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991), also played an important role in analyzing and interpreting data. The final themes are oriented towards students' participation in a research community. As Lave and Wenger (1991) explained, learning is a process of participation in communities of practice. Recognizing that participation in social practice is a fundamental form of learning and doctoral students learn research by doing research, the themes I identified uncovered the ways students' status (part time and full time) and other factors shaped their legitimate peripheral participation in RAships.

Doctoral RAs (newcomers) working alongside experienced researchers may have opportunities to become part of a research community and move toward fuller

participation within a specific community of practice. Lave and Wenger (1991) refer to this way of engagement as legitimate peripheral participation and argue that the key to legitimate peripherality is access by newcomers to the community of practice (i.e., access to information, resources, and members of the community). Coding each segment of data separately and developing themes for each subcase allowed me to uncover the ways students' status (part time or full time) shaped their legitimate peripheral participation in RAships. The developed themes also provided rich insight into the ways RAships are carried out and managed in this particular program. As Wenger (1998) articulated, learning is not a separate activity but a process that is embedded in practice and in the activities of a given community.

### **Trustworthiness of Findings**

Throughout the process of data collection and analysis, I used diverse strategies to determine trustworthiness of my interpretations and findings. Lincoln and Guba (1985) explained that trustworthiness in qualitative research is meant to support the argument that the research findings are “worth paying attention to” (p. 290). Creswell (2011) asserted that the credibility of findings is very important and identified triangulation, member checking, and auditing as primary strategies to validate findings.

In order to deliver accurate and credible findings, I used a triangulation process and corroborated evidence from the three groups of participants (doctoral students, research supervisors, and administrators) and two methods of data collection (personal interviews and document analysis). As Creswell (2011) explained, “Triangulation is the process of documenting and verifying evidence from different individuals, types of data,

and methods of data collection in descriptions and themes in qualitative research” (p. 259).

I employed member checking to allow participants to verify transcripts of their interviews as well as withdraw and add information. I also used informal verbal member checking by paraphrasing and summarizing during personal interviews in order to verify my understandings of the information acquired from each participant.

After the data were member checked, I conducted systematic data analysis. I maintained and reported an audit trail showing in detail how data were classified and entered into NVivo software, how and how many codes were assigned, how main themes were derived, and how decisions were made throughout the process. As explained by Carcary (2009), research audit trails are meant to showcase quality findings through transparent research processes and are a valuable tool in enabling other researchers and readers to confirm the research findings.

In addition, to promote the credibility of my interpretations I quoted extensively from participants in the findings chapters. Including numerous quotations derived from participants’ responses is intended to allow readers to make connections and assess congruency between the voices of my participants and my interpretations. The rich data also provide readers with the level of information necessary to consider how similar or different this case study context may be from their own contexts, and hence support judgements about possible transferability.

### **Limitations of the Study**

It is important to consider that, as in all research studies, there are some limitations to the findings of this study. This discussion of limitations is meant to (a)

inform readers to what extent the findings can be relevant to other institutions and programs and (b) assist researchers in planning future research studies, including studies that would address specific weaknesses of the present study.

First, this case-within-a-case-study is context specific and cannot be generalized to other institutions and programs. This investigation of doctoral RAships is specific to one program in one field at one Ontario institution at a particular period of time. At the same time, this study has potential to inform other institutions and programs about ways to enhance access to and practice within RAships. In-depth analyses of students' experiences (as expressed by students and complemented by voices of research supervisors and administrators) along with a detailed description of the context in which these experiences occurred are intended to provide rich information that readers can consider when comparing these findings with the particulars of other institutions and programs. There might be differences in how research assistantships are regulated and organized across institutions and different fields. The present study may provide an important reference point for future investigations at other sites.

Second, the findings rely on a relatively small number of participants from each group. In terms of data saturation, I feel confident in terms of representation of doctoral students since 13 participants represent 29% of doctoral students enrolled in the program during the data collection period (Fall 2013). I also feel that the responses of administrators provide an accurate picture about RAships at this specific site since they were the two key individuals in charge of organization and formal distribution of RA positions. I am less confident in terms of data saturation for research supervisors considering that this study included only 5 research supervisors and potentially those who

volunteered to participate were the ones committed to providing educational and ethical RAships. It is difficult to assess how representative their voices are of other research supervisors. However, it was not my intention for their responses to be fully representative but rather to provide a flavour for this particular program. It is also important to note that the responses of research supervisors were not the focus of this investigation but were meant to complement the voices of doctoral students.

Third, the responses of doctoral students are based on their perceptions and feelings, and may at times seem myopic. It was my intention to allow doctoral students to express their perceptions freely and not to overpower them with additional questioning of their lived experiences. The trade-off, however, may leave the impression that students were not aware of their experiences in relation to the larger picture of academic structures. Doctoral students may have narrow perspectives as they rely mainly on their personal experiences as opposed to research supervisors and administrators who have broader perspectives through greater awareness about collective experiences. In Chapter Seven and Eight, I challenge some of the doctoral students' ideas by identifying factors that may have conditioned their experiences.

Fourth, there are also limitations associated with my position as a research instrument. As identified in the section on researcher's positioning in Chapter One, I identify myself as an *insider* and an *outsider* to the experiences of my participants. My insider position relates to my experiences as a graduate student and a research assistant. I also share some of the social locations and experiences with the group of doctoral students. Inevitably, I bring some preconceived views to this research regardless of my commitment to approach this study with neutrality and an honest intention to learn about

my participants' experiences. As described above, I have endeavoured to document my research practices thoroughly as a means to enhance the trustworthiness of this account.

These limitations along with the findings of this study provide a number of recommendations for practice and future research, which I discuss further in the final chapter.



## **CHAPTER FOUR: CONTEXT FOR RESEARCH ASSISTANTSHIPS CASE**

The purpose of this case study is to explore RAship experiences of full-time and part-time doctoral students in Education at an Ontario university. As Creswell (2011) indicated, it is essential to locate the case under investigation to gain an understanding of the larger context. In order to situate the case, I provide an overview of the program with specific attention to practices, regulations, and documents that may influence access to and experiences within RAships. This section is written based on the university's publicly available documents as well as interviews with the two administrators associated with the program. For confidentiality purposes, the documents are categorized as university documents, Faculty documents, and program documents. It is important to note that I relied on documents and regulations specific to a given time (current as of Fall 2013); some of the documents are updated annually therefore the information may change over time.

This chapter serves as a context for the case and the subcases. Its purpose is to provide an understanding of the program and organizational characteristics of RAships (i.e., structures of access, distribution, and coordination of participation).

### **Doctoral Program in Educational Studies**

The program under investigation is fully accredited by the Ontario Council on Graduate Studies. It is one of a few programs in Ontario that offer flexible learning environments in terms of possibilities to study on a full-time or part-time basis (Saliba, 2012). The program involves face-to-face seminars in condensed blocks during two time periods plus online delivery for other courses, which allows students easy access regardless of their geographic area. The faculty members represent a wide range of

disciplines and research interests, which maximizes students' opportunities and promotes development of future scholars as well as leaders in school systems and other institutional settings.

There are three fields of study in the program focusing on educational policy, educational psychology, and critical theory. The program promotes scholarly inquiry and the generation of new knowledge as well as methodological advances in educational research and the integration of theory and practice. As indicated in the program's mission statement, there is a commitment to nurture students as developing scholars and leaders. The main role of the faculty members is to facilitate doctoral students' immersion into the research culture (program document, 2013). To support students' research education and therefore development of their identities as researchers, the program offers research methods courses where students are exposed to qualitative and quantitative research methods in education, a comprehensive examination where students are required to demonstrate their research skills and knowledge, and dissertation research where each student undertakes an independent study investigating a relevant issue in education under the supervision of a doctoral committee. In addition, students may engage in RAships to assist research supervisors with their research projects.

### **Structure**

The program offers access to study and research training to individuals who would not be able to relocate families or leave their employment for several consecutive years to pursue a traditionally structured doctoral program. Doctoral students are required to complete formal course work, a comprehensive examination, and an independent research project (the dissertation). This organization is meant to help students meet all

program requirements within a specific time period. In order to ensure academic success, each year, students are required to prepare annual progress reports showcasing their academic achievements. The reports are reviewed and approved by students' supervisors and the graduate program director.

All first-year students begin the program in July and must complete two compulsory face-to-face courses during their first and second summers. In the Fall term of their first year, students normally take one or two specialization courses in their respective fields of study. The field of study specialization courses are delivered through distance technology (one online and one usually independent). Although the program structure, including the timing of the first compulsory course and residency requirements, is somewhat fixed, the other courses and the independent work allow space for students to design plans of study that meet their own personal and professional objectives. This structure allows students to take ownership and accountability for their own learning and progress within the program. As reported by one of the administrators, there is a commitment to support students while maintaining the high standards, excellence, and integrity that are expected of doctoral level work through mentorship, supervision of student work, and faculty–student collaborations.

After completion of all coursework, students are expected to prepare and defend their comprehensive examinations. The comprehensive examination requires students to demonstrate profound knowledge of their respective fields of study, along with the research skills necessary to undertake dissertation research. The comprehensive examination provides evidence for the examiners that students are prepared to move to the next stage of the doctoral program and undertake original research. As reported in the

program document (2013), course work is considered to be complete only when students have successfully passed the comprehensive examination.

The next stage requires students to finalize and defend their dissertation proposals. Drafting the proposal may originate early in the program, especially for those seeking external funding, or in the final research course, which allows students to examine theory and research in relation to their dissertation topic. With the development of students' research knowledge and interests throughout the program, research proposals may unfold and shift from the original plans. The dissertation proposal is approved when the examiners are satisfied with its quality and convinced that the candidate is ready to proceed with the proposed research (program document, 2013). From this point, students follow the university's protocols to complete and then defend their dissertations.

Full-time students are considered in residence throughout the course of the program and are expected to complete their degrees within four years. Part-time students are allowed to complete the requirements of the program over an extended period of time and fulfil residency requirements during the two doctoral seminars (two condensed blocks during the two time periods) and two other consecutive terms. As explained in the program document (2013), the program is to be completed between 3 to 6 years. It is suggested that part-time students undertake two consecutive terms of residency after they have defended their comprehensive examination and dissertation proposal (program document, 2013). The residency period requires students to be on campus, which allows part-time students to meet and work with faculty members as well as attend various functions and presentations at the university to help them with their research.

There is a substantial emphasis in the program on building foundational knowledge and research skills throughout the coursework (program document, 2013). Doctoral students are encouraged to attend skill-building workshops, collaborate with faculty and colleagues, engage in graduate assistantships, and get involved in the research community locally, nationally, and internationally (interview with administrator).

### **Enrolment**

As reported by the administrators, the program consistently receives far more applications than it can accommodate. Admission to the program is limited, and the selection process is highly competitive (program document, 2013). All applicants to the doctoral program are required to select a field of study, submit a description of the proposed area of research, and outline whether their studies will proceed on a full-time or part-time basis.

The interviews with administrators revealed that originally the program mainly attracted mid-career professionals in the field of Education; however, more students are now entering the program earlier in their careers on a full-time basis. Many students are local professionals as well as those from distant areas.

As stated earlier, the program accommodates students on a full-time or part-time basis. At the time of data collection (Fall 2013), 56% of students (25) were registered full time and 44% were registered part time (20). The program includes a diverse group of students in terms of age, gender, race, cultural background, and economic status. The domestic students come from across Canada and very few students come from outside the country. Since the beginning of the program, there has been much higher representation of females (around 75%) than males (interview with administrator). This is very common

in the field of Education, which is overrepresented by females generally (Government of Canada, 2012; Turcotte, 2013).

### **Funding for Doctoral Students**

Financial support is available for all full-time students during the first four years of study. The support offers fellowship funding, guaranteed paid employment through graduate assistantships, and additional institutional incentive awards. The main funding package for full-time students includes a graduate fellowship that requires no work and a graduate assistantship that requires students to work as teaching assistants, research assistants, language assistants, or instructors if they wish to receive that funding component. For the past two years, the graduate fellowship amounted approximately to \$12,000 and graduate assistantship to \$7,200 per year for each student (interview with administrator).

In addition to the main funding package, full-time students are eligible to receive twice during their studies the Faculty of Education Research Fellowship. Each year, there are either six \$5,000 fellowships or five \$6,000 fellowships available (interview with administrator). Students compete for these fellowships; however, no employment is required for successful applicants. As indicated by the two administrators, doctoral students are encouraged to participate in the university's research culture by attending (a) comprehensive examination and dissertation defences of their peers, (b) lectures by visiting scholars, and (c) presentations by faculty members and other graduate students. In addition, students are encouraged to present at on-campus graduate student conferences (one hosted annually by the Faculty and one by the university). Partial

funding is provided to support doctoral students to present at off-campus academic conferences.

As indicated by the two administrators, although most funding opportunities are restricted to full-time students, the program is committed to fund as many students as possible, therefore part-time students are given fellowships that are prorated during their two-term residency periods. In addition, part-time students can also access funding for conference presentations or work as graduate assistants if qualified full-time students are not available.

University-related employment for positions such as RAships provides financial support for graduate students and work experience that is designed to supplement their formal academic programs, and contribute to skills development relevant to their future careers. However, as per province-wide standards, full-time graduate students are expected to devote time to their studies and should not exceed 10 hours per week on any employment (Council of Ontario Universities, 2013, para. 1). In special circumstances when the employment does not interfere but rather benefits students' progress toward degree completion, the number of paid employment hours may be extended with the permission of the student's supervisor, the graduate program director, and the Dean of Graduate Studies. Part-time students are eligible to work over 10 hours per week, but not more than 44 hours as per the provincial Employment Standards (Ontario Ministry of Labour, 2013).

In terms of external funding, full-time students are expected to apply for funding from sources such as the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and the Ontario Graduate Scholarship (program document, 2013).

### **Funding for Research Assistants**

As reported by the administrators, the Faculty of Education supports faculty research through two main funds: the Graduate Research Assistant Development (GRAD) Fund (around \$31,000 annually) and the Research and Development (R&D) Fund (around \$10,000 annually). The GRAD Fund is most directly relevant for support to graduate students and specifically to educate them about research. Every faculty member is eligible to apply once a year for a 60-hour contract on the condition that during the contract they provide training to graduate students hired. Each student is eligible to apply and accept one contract per term. Full-time students have priority but part-time students can be hired if full-time students are not available. The idea is to support full-time students who are not working and provide them with additional income and learning opportunities.

Providing research training to students is part of the GRAD Fund criteria but it is not part of the R&D Fund criteria. As one of the administrators explained, the department encourages professors to use the R&D Fund to support graduate students' research education; however, there is no requirement or obligation to do so. In fact, the funding can be used for other activities related to the professors' research agendas.

There are also other internal grants from the university that serve as seed grants meant to support research projects leading to external grant applications. As well, there are some special purpose grants, for manuscript preparation (up to \$1,500), organizing a workshop (up to \$5,000), or other scholarly activities. Some of those sources could be used towards hiring a graduate student as an RA (interview with administrators). In



addition, some faculty members have external grants from sources such as SSHRC. Providing research training to graduate students is part of the SSHRC funding criteria.

### **Recruitment of Research Assistants**

As explained by administrators, the Faculty of Education has a mechanism in place where students interested in working as RAs can submit a Student Application Form, their current curriculum vitae (CV), and a brief outline of their research interests to the Faculty's research office. The form, along with a student's CV is then placed in a binder and is made available to researchers interested in hiring RAs. The intention is to assign RAships to full-time students and to provide as fair a distribution as possible. The application process allows researchers to see which students are interested in RA positions, the pool of existing skills, and the training students would like to receive. To that end, the RA application form provides space for students to state their prior research experience and the researcher with whom they would like to collaborate. The form also asks for the type of research training they would like to receive during the assistantship. The intention is to match research interests of researchers with research interests of graduate students. Another anticipated benefit from assistantships based on common research interests is the enhancement of knowledge in the students' area and therefore advancement of their dissertation.

This recruitment process helps students and researchers. On one hand, it enables students to engage in research projects that offer them opportunities to develop new skills and on the other hand, it supports researchers to find suitable RAs. However, it is important to note that not all hiring goes through the research office; students may become informed about RAship opportunities from course instructors or through

conversations with their colleagues. The Faculty of Education typically organizes orientation sessions at the beginning of the Fall semester for researchers to talk about their projects and associated RAship opportunities (interview with administrator). These informative sessions promote student participation in RAships while disseminating information about researchers' current research interests.

### **Employment Contracts**

The contract of employment contains the terms and conditions graduate students can expect when hired for RA positions. It indicates the position title, rate of pay, number of contract hours, and the dates of appointment and termination. The duties, responsibilities, and level of engagement in RAships may vary according to the type of research project and its progress.

There are different ways of creating a contract. Researchers with GRAD funding (described earlier) may create contracts for 60 hours meanwhile those with other funding may be able to support students for shorter or longer periods of time (interview with administrator). To that end, the agreement could be set up as a one-time contract where RAs decide the frequency of pay until the contract is finished. Alternatively, some contracts require RAs to submit timesheets, which need to be signed by a research supervisor. In those situations, students get paid after completing assigned work rather than on a set schedule. It is a responsibility of students to accept only as many RAship hours as are reasonable for successful completion of assigned duties and successful progress toward their academic degrees. Studentss meanwhile those with other fundin of their last completed degree; doctoral students receive the highest rate (around \$26.00 per hour).

### **Relevant Guidelines**

Recently, the Faculty of Education released a handbook specific to RAships (Faculty document, 2014), which provides evidence of the Faculty's commitment to the development of researchers. The document is meant to inform students and research supervisors how to engage in educational and ethical RAships and respectful partnerships. It also provides comprehensive guidelines in terms of available resources and support people. The purpose of the document is to recognize RAships as valuable research learning and mentoring venues and thus encourage students and researchers to take part in RAships (interview with administrator).

There are two main offices within the Faculty that vigorously support those involved in RAships. An Associate Dean for research supports research supervisors and RAs in conducting research. Meanwhile, the Faculty's research office provides support in terms of workshops (e.g., grant writing, publishing), group or one-on-one tutorials (e.g., using diverse software programs, preparing research ethics applications), recruitment of RAs, research promotion, and more (interview with administrator). The university also provides a free professional development skills training service for graduate students. Through a variety of workshops and activities, students can explore career paths and develop career competencies alongside their academic knowledge and skills (Faculty document, 2014). The university library offers specific workshops that benefit RAs, and the curriculum library is designed to meet the specialized needs of Education students.

Besides the RAship handbook, there are other documents that although not targeted specifically toward RAships do cover ethical standards and the rights of

students, therefore may inform collaborations within that space. For instance, the faculty handbook (university document, 2014) includes descriptions of students' rights and responsibilities as well as expectations for graduate supervision. The document states that the role of a supervisor is to advise, monitor, and mentor. Supervisors are expected to not only provide guidance, instruction, and encouragement in the research activities of their students, but also take part in the ongoing evaluation of their students' progress and performance. Graduate supervisors, early on in their students' programs, have a duty to discuss accepted authorship practices within their disciplines and to encourage their active engagement in the dissemination of research results in scholarly journals and presentations at conferences and seminars. On a similar note, the intellectual property policy (university document, 2010) provides guidelines on different aspects of intellectual property rights (including copyright). The policy covers the rights of current and former students, RAs, and postdoctoral fellows who attend the university and after they leave, with or without a degree.

The respectful work policy (university document, 2007) aims to promote and support a work and learning culture that values diversity and inclusion, and does not tolerate prejudice, discrimination, or harassment. Integrity is considered fundamental to research and scholarship. The university under investigation acknowledges and accepts responsibility for maintaining ethical standards in research and scholarship and agrees to investigate and resolve promptly and fairly all instances of alleged misconduct. The integrity in research policy (university document, 2014) applies to academic activities of all registered students and all members of a research team. It establishes principles that promote integrity in research and scholarship, and procedures to investigate allegations of

misconduct. As confirmed by one of the administrators, in case of potential conflicts within an RAsip, it is advisable for the student to first try to resolve the situation with the faculty member in question. The next step would be to contact the department chair who would listen to the problem (meeting separately with a research supervisor and a student) then contact the Ombudsperson to discuss the issue and come up with recommendations. After that, a letter is written to the conflicting parties, which clearly describes the issue from different perspectives and outlines potential solutions. The intention is to resolve the issue at the department level without proceeding further to the university level (interview with administrator).

There are also external documents that may inform RAsip practice. The three main documents mentioned by the administrators are the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* (CIHR, NSERC, & SSHRC, 2014), the *Ethical Standards of the American Educational Research Association: Cases and Commentary* (Strike et al., 2002), and the *American Educational Research Association Code of Ethics* (AERA, 2011).

The *Tri-Council Policy Statement* (CIHR, NSERC, & SSHRC, 2014) is a document meant to inform and assist those involved in research (researchers, research assistants, participants, members of research ethics boards, and the community) in identifying and finding solutions to ethical issues in the design and conduct of research. At the core of this policy is a respect for human dignity, which is expressed through three core principles: respect for persons, concern for welfare, and justice. The policy clearly states that no single document can provide definitive answers to all ethical issues that may arise when undertaking research involving humans. Therefore, other documents

including policies on research integrity and conflicts of interest in research should also be taken into consideration. The *Tri-Council Policy Statement* describes that risks within research projects are not limited to participants; researchers and student researchers (e.g., RAs) may also be exposed to risks. For instance, risks can be associated with power dynamics or safety researchers (e.g., respect for human dignity, which is expressed through the conduct of research, and who may be subject to pressures from supervisors to conduct research in unsafe situations” (p. 25).

The *Ethical Standards of the American Educational Research Association: Cases and Commentary* (Strike et al., 2002) is an educational document meant to guide the practices of education researchers. The order of content in the document is followed by several cases and discussions illustrating their complexities and potential ambiguities. The American Educational Research Association (AERA) developed and adapted the standards in order to stimulate collegial discussion and explore different perspectives on issues represented within these standards. Such discussions may be especially educational for novice scholars with limited experience of ethical problems that may arise throughout the research process.

The standards of part VI (Strike et al., 2002) emphasize that researchers are also educators responsible for training future researchers. Thus researchers have responsibility to (a) provide proper training and supervision to student researchers and (b) support and nurture novice researchers through commitment to their professional development. Furthermore, the standards specify, “the relationship between a novice and an expert must be conducted for the benefit of the student, and that relationship must be fair, educative, and non-exploitive” (p. 155).

The 2002 AERA ethical standards document was updated with the 2011 AERA code of ethics. However, the 2002 document still remains a useful resource of cases and commentaries regarding ethical principles and practices. The *Code of Ethics of the American Educational Research Association* (2011) is intended to serve as a guide for educational researchers in terms of principles for ethical conduct in various contexts. In addition, it is meant to educate student researchers and others involved in educational research. The AERA code underlies educational researchers' professional responsibilities and conduct including mentorship and supervision of students. The code fosters ethical behaviour, equity, integrity, and commitment to students' welfare. Researchers are expected to assign to students (including students employed as RAs) those responsibilities that they are able to perform either independently or with supervision.

### **Summary**

As stated in earlier sections, RAships can offer opportunities for doctoral students to expand their research knowledge and skills while providing assistance to research supervisors for their projects. RAships are practical educational spaces that have potential to provide research opportunities and foster the growth of confident and competent researchers. This research study focuses specifically on RAships where doctoral students (full time and part time) are paid by the university or research supervisors to assist in research. I do not consider unpaid research internships for course credit or research fellowships. The types of RAships I am investigating involve a contract of employment for a determined period of time to accomplish assigned tasks. It is important to note that RAships are optional and competitive, therefore not all students undertake them, and experiences may differ vastly amongst those who do become RAs.

The purpose of this chapter was to provide an understanding of the doctoral program and organizational characteristics of RAships at the institution under investigation. To that end, I have described the doctoral program, including its structure, enrolment, and financial support available for doctoral students. Particular attention was devoted to aspects pertaining to RAships such as funding available to hire RAs, recruitment processes, and terms and conditions associated with RAs' contracts of employment. The final section of this chapter described internal and external documents that may inform RAship practice. All the above-mentioned elements provide an important contextual picture that may influence full-time and part-time doctoral students' experiences with RAships.

The next two chapters illustrate separately the subcase of RAships for full-time students (Chapter Five) and the subcase of RAships for part-time students (Chapter Six). Each subcase provides rich data for the 12 themes identified through the data analysis process. Chapter Seven illustrates the overarching case of RAships for doctoral students, describing similarities and differences within and across the two subcases. The overarching case provides fuller thematic analysis across the subcases in connection to this context, the scholarly literature, and the theoretical framework. Throughout these chapters, the responses from doctoral students are complemented by voices of research supervisors who work with doctoral RAs, administrators familiar with the ways RAships are carried out and managed, and relevant documents.



## **CHAPTER FIVE: SUBCASE OF RESEARCH ASSISTANTSHIPS FOR FULL-TIME STUDENTS**

This chapter provides meaningful interpretation of the 12 final themes that emerged from the data analysis process. The interpretation is based on the experiences of eight full-time students, four with and four without RAships. Doctoral students' experiences are complemented by responses from research supervisors, administrators, and relevant documents.

### **Full-Time Students' Self-Identification**

As stated in the first chapter, although the research focus is on students' status as a factor influencing their doctoral RAships, I recognize that other factors such as gender, race, age, and cultural background, just to mention a few, may also influence doctoral students' access to and experiences within RAships. To that end, in order to get a sense of who my participants are, I asked students to self-identify and to share what factors influenced their decision to undertake full-time studies. It was important for me to understand what influenced their decisions to become full-time students in the first place as some of those circumstances could condition their experiences. The participants were asked to contribute only information they felt comfortable sharing.

There are eight full-time doctoral students who participated in the study, four with and four without RAship experiences. Most of the participants are Caucasian women. In fact, women are over-represented in the full-time doctoral students group (three men and five women). Ages ranged from 20s to 60s (not all participants reported age). Four of the participants identified having European background and two reported being born outside Canada. However, all participants recognized English as their current dominant language.

None of the participants identified as a visible minority or claimed Aboriginal ancestry. The following is a more detailed overview of full-time students, first for students with RAship experiences and then for students without RAship experiences.

Three out of the four full-time students with RAships were females between 25- and 35- years old. Two of them were Caucasian with European background and one Asian born in Canada. A male participant identified as Caucasian, born and raised in the United States. Two of the participants indicated that English was not their first language, but it is now their dominant language. All four participants were in committed relationships: three married and one in a common-law relationship. Two of them have children at various ages.

Two of the participants with RAships were in their fifth year of the program, one in the fourth year, and one in the third year. At the time of the interviews, all four participants had passed their comprehensive examinations and were working on their dissertations. Two of the participants commenced their programs as full-time students but later switched to part-time status due to family circumstances. As explained in Chapter Three, I included these two participants within the pool of full-time students with RA experiences because they were full-time students during their RAships and that was the time period they described in their interviews.

All four participants with RAships were financially funded for the first four years of their studies (internally or externally). The participant in the fifth year, who did not have funding at the time of the interview, voiced concern regarding her financial situation.

Two out of four full-time students without RAship experiences were females, one Caucasian and one South-Asian (brought up with Westernized influences). Both women were married and one with children. The two male participants were married and with children at various ages. Two of the participants in this group were born in Canada and one in the United States. Three of the participants were in the second year and one in the fourth year of the PhD program. All participants without RAships were financially funded (internally or externally).

### **Reasons for Studying Full Time**

Three of the participants with RAships came to the program right after completing their master's degrees on full-time bases. It seemed natural for them to transition into the next level of graduate studies also as full-time students. Four participants indicated that their personality and work style influenced their decisions to immerse fully in the doctoral program. For example, one said, "I thought that as a full-time student I can kind of embrace that graduate student life a little bit more, where I can be on campus, participate in activities, immerse myself in the culture and life of an academic" (Full-time student with RAships).

Participants also mentioned their family situations as a factor. One participant mentioned that his children are adults and therefore parental obligations were not an issue for him: "I couldn't do it part time. I have to get on it and get things done otherwise nothing gets done. And even about my family, my kids are adults so that's not an issue" (Full-time student with RAships). Another participant also indicated financial support of a spouse as a factor allowing her to undertake full-time studies: "I wanted to complete a PhD and I was going to go full force. I didn't need to consider part time. It was

something that I wanted to do full time and I was lucky enough that my husband worked full time and could support us financially” (Full-time student with RAships).

All four participants identified the funding package offered to full-time students for the first four years as an incentive. However, one of the participants emphasized that although studying full time had seemed to be the best option in the past, now she was questioning that choice. Her main reason for reconsidering her original decision was due to financial stress after her funding ended and she was left with an unknown future:

I’m wondering maybe it would have been better to do it on a part-time basis, also for the realities of the fact that it can be challenging finding a job. I thought that maybe if I would have worked on developing my professional contacts and being involved in a professional life from the beginning then I might not have been in such a vulnerable and unstable position now. Now I’m coming to the fact of I have no money, I’m concerned about how to make the ends meet, and I’m thinking what exists for me after . . . I feel that I live below the poverty line as a graduate student. It is very difficult for me to make ends meet, it’s such a struggle just thinking about daily survival like the most basic necessities of rent and food. My partner was a student throughout most of my graduate studies as well, he just recently graduated but he still hasn’t found the job so right now we have zero income coming in. So this is such a burden and something that is on my mind a lot. (Full-time student with RAships)

As the participant clarified, she did not consider all these implications before her funding ran out. She later explained that the duration of funding is too limited because not everyone is able to complete a dissertation within the four-year period of time:

So is that what it is about to quickly move through or do you want to be able to immerse yourself in RAships, TAships [teaching assistantships] but also other things, projects outside of the university. They all take time and when you compound that with other things whether is health or family issues . . . there needs to be a little more flexibility. (Full-time student with RAships)

Two of the full-time participants without RAships mentioned looking into opportunities of doing doctoral studies in the past but since their children were very young at that point they decided to postpone their plans. Now that their children are independent or full time in school, both participants were able to undertake doctoral studies full time. One participant decided to study full time because of the funding available for full-time students. This participant was unemployed at the enrolment time and doctoral funding provided a financial contribution for his family. Another participant, who considered changing a career path at the outset of the degree, said that money was not an issue in his family situation; however, funding for full-time students was one more reason for him to study full time.

In one case, the participant enrolled in the program on a part-time basis since she had full-time employment. However, after securing an OGS award, the participant switched to full-time status in order to accept the award and applied for a leave of absence from work. As the student indicated in the interview, she was hesitant to turn down the award and was happy to take a break from work. On a similar note, another student also took an extended leave of absence from work to undertake the doctoral program full time.

### **Access to Research Assistantships**

From the group of participants who worked as RAs, only one of them reported following a formal process of recruitment as described in the context chapter, whereas the other three participants reported securing RAs through informal means. In most cases, students were contacted directly by the researcher familiar with their work ethics or through recommendation from one researcher to another. Two of the participants explained that if they had not secured RAs informally, they would have gone through the formal process of submitting an application along with their CV to the research office. In order to raise their chances of securing assistantships they would also send out emails to researchers indicating their interest in RA positions.

The responses from doctoral full-time students with RAs correspond to information reported by the research supervisors who indicated finding RAs either through personal contacts (supervising students' doctoral work, being on students' committees, having students in their courses), recommendations, or the research office. According to one research supervisor, there is no shortage of RA candidates, but there is a shortage of money to hire them.

When students were asked specifically about factors that influenced their access to RAs, some explained that research expertise increased their access. For example, one explained, "being well versed in qualitative and quantitative research methodologies probably gives you more access because you are competent in both areas" (Full-time student with RAs). The full-time students with RAs indicated that students get hired as RAs based on the skills they already have. In addition, they emphasized that

those with skills have a higher chance of getting the position over someone who needs research training:

When I look back at research assistantships, I would say that generally I do feel that professors have the expectation or that they are very happy when they can just send you on your own and then get the work done back. (Full-time student with RAships)

When I first started the program, professors might have been more hesitant to take me on because I didn't have big experience that a fourth year student might have. [Research supervisors] are always fishing for experience because they themselves are so busy that they don't have time to dedicate to teaching students. (Full-time student with RAships)

Research supervisors explained that they sought students who were well organized, were dependable, and had responsible attitudes towards research work. The majority of supervisors expressed preferences for hiring independent students who had the necessary skills to complete the tasks and sufficient understanding of the topic area:

The determining factor is that the person can do the job and I know that it is hoped that we will train students in research techniques and I don't know how successful my colleagues are in doing that but I think there is a real temptation to look for students who already have demonstrated a significant level of competence. And of course if [the research assistantship] allows them to have new experiences or to develop new skills that's great but given time constraints and so on I have to admit that finding someone that you don't have to supervise closely is an important plus. (Research supervisor)

When I look at the list of options as to who to hire, I'm going to be concerned about my understanding of their general research skills and I'm going to be particularly interested in their ability to quickly engage in the kind of research that I want to do. (Research supervisor)

I don't know if it's a good or a bad thing to say but I prefer research assistants who have autonomy. I prefer RAs who I can meet with them once, explain everything, my expectations of them and the trouble I had along the way is somebody who needs constant kind of feedback and support. (Research supervisor)

The last research supervisor quoted also added that although she was looking for someone independent where she would not need to invest extensive time in training and monitoring, sometimes she found it difficult because she did not know what exactly her RAs were doing during the hours for which they were getting paid:

Just to be honest the trouble is that you want independence but at the same time it starts to get unwieldy when you don't know hours. So you don't know exactly what people are doing. Now, one of the ways I get around that is to have fieldnotes sent and out of the four RAs I had mixed kinds of fieldnotes. Some have been really detailed and really helpful and some were just bullet points. So being concerned with am I getting the most for my money?

It is important to note that these were preferences research supervisors held when they were hiring doctoral RAs; some research supervisors clarified that they would have different expectations in terms of competencies and research training for master's students:



First and foremost if it's a doctoral RA, which I consider different than a master's RA because I'm assuming they have the skills. The first thing I look for in a doctoral student is someone who has the experience in a given research area that I'm interested in. It doesn't have to be a direct experience but at least knowledgeable about the area. So when we are communicating by email and face to face and when the tasks are given to the students they are aware of what to do, which just facilitates the entire process. The second thing would be the actual skills, would it be hard skills such as statistical, analytical skills versus soft skills like general literature review type of skills. (Research supervisor)

I expect to do some training and provide educational experiences for them but it should be less than I would do for a master's student, far less. That's why I'm not choosing doctoral candidates as research assistants who for example if they never constructed a survey then I would not be there to show them how to do a survey. I would seek out someone who has some background in survey. (Research supervisor)

In terms of formal distribution of RA positions through the Faculty's research office, one administrator clarified that efforts are made to hire students who have not worked as RAs. However, the process is not systematic for two reasons: (a) there was no database in place to show which students had RAships and which did not, and (b) researchers hire students informally:

I'm asked to distribute RAships to full-time students and that there is fairness in distribution. So when I send out names I always send names of those who were not hired yet or those who don't have TA work but that's not very systematic

because professors hire students on their own as well. Not all hiring goes through this office so professors can hire students through informal conversations. There is also an RAship orientation workshop at the beginning of the Fall semester where students and faculty members are invited and faculty members talk about their research and potentially hire RAs. (Administrator)

Another administrator explained that researchers are working with strict deadlines and need to focus on progressing with their projects in a time-efficient manner. In addition, having limited internal funding, they sometimes prefer hiring someone who can come into project for a few hours to complete specific tasks and thus help move the project forward:

There are also different deadlines that faculty members have and if they have one week to finish something they will try to hire somebody with skills and experience, someone who is more independent. If there is more time available, then more training can take place and people can hire someone who never had a research assistantship. So we have to think about the needs of both parties.

(Administrator)

During interview conversations about hiring practices for RAs, several students brought attention to their perceptions that research supervisors were extremely busy and as a result did not have time to train RAs:

As much as idealistically speaking it would be great to take on a new student and teach them all along the way, realistically unless it is the supervisor they just don't have the time to dedicate to students. So idealistically yes it is fair to engage new

students but realistically I think that professors would rather take someone with more experience. (Full-time student with RAships)

Some full-time students questioned the actual purpose of RAships considering that research supervisors prefer hiring students with existing research skills. This sentiment was well captured in the following quote: “So what is a research assistantship? Is it an opportunity to learn or opportunity to practice the skills you already have?” (Full-time student with RAships). On the same note, one student wondered why would students be required to have a certain set of skills in order to become RAs: “If we would have all the skills already then why would we even bother with RAships” (Full-time student with RAships). As one full-time student concluded,

It’s the same old catch 22, how are you supposed to get experience if you can’t get a job and you can’t get a job without experience. Assuming that there is constant rotation of students through the system, even by many dropping out or few moving through, which I think it’s mostly the case . . . this should make possible for almost everybody to get something [i.e., at least one RA position].  
(Full-time student with RAships)

Both administrators reported that they have limited input into whom researchers decide to hire to assist with their research projects: “We have no way of controlling what faculty members do, except for good will. I can’t force a faculty member to hire a person as a research assistant if they wish to hire someone else” (Administrator).

In terms of full-time students securing RAships, one of the students acknowledged that the regulation for full-time students to work only 10 hours per week might have a positive impact for access to RAships. Instead of one student having

multiple RAships, the 10-hour limit allows multiple students to secure RA opportunities. As a result, novice RAs who are in competition with more experienced students may have a chance.

The majority of full-time students without RAships expressed lacking information about RAships in general. They emphasized that assistantships are not well advertised and it is difficult for them to foresee when one may become available:

First of all it is not clear to me how you find out what's available. I went to that workshop where some professor said I will have one in such an area but if I wouldn't go to the workshop I wouldn't know that they even existed. I don't know if there is any website that is available. If there is then it hasn't been well publicized. (Full-time student without RAships).

Students' reports about poorly advertised assistantship opportunities were not surprising because research supervisors also indicated that it was challenging for students to know what projects or positions are potentially available. Most of the research supervisors attributed this gap between awareness of what RA positions are available and who is interested in RA positions to lack of electronic accessibility to such information:

I don't think we do a good job in having one place where students can look and see what funding professors have and thus who may potentially look for someone. We just don't have a very good system to showcase what faculty are doing and showcase interests and skills that our graduate students have. I think of it as an online dating service, you know here is my profile, here is your profile and I'm interested in finding someone and you are interested in finding someone, are we compatible? On many levels, interests, skills, [and] time, meaning maybe you

only need someone two hours per week and the person can easily fit that in.

Accessibility of information as to what's out there and vice versa in a reciprocal way. And they may be looking for a particular experience so they may be looking to analyze data and look for a person who just does that. (Research supervisor)

Three out of four participants without RAships attended a workshop on RAships and tried to establish a place within the community through frequent presence on campus. Yet, when looking for RAship opportunities they were not able to find one. The main issue may be connected to the timing when RAships are being offered. Full-time students take on whatever becomes available since they do not want to lose the paid fellowship portion of their doctoral funding package. As described in the context section, part of students' main funding package includes a graduate assistantship that requires students to work as teaching assistants, research assistants, language assistants, or instructors if they wish to receive it. To that end, full-time students often sign up for any available employment at a given moment rather than what they would prefer or consider beneficial for their professional development. Some students voiced their disappointment that after they took on the first available position, they were not able to undertake another one because of the 10 hours per week limit. As one said, "I got some emails sent to everybody about RAship opportunities but at that time I had a TA position and I knew that we can't exceed more than 10 hours per week" (Full-time student without RAships). One participant added that even if he would be approved to work additional hours (i.e., to extend beyond the 10-hour limit), he would not be able to accept that because of his other commitments at home:

When I started the program, I don't think that I knew what an RAship was and I didn't know how to access them anyways. And because being in the program has financial aspects to it, we get some funding as full-time students but then a part of that is that you are expected to work 10 hours per week at the university but I didn't know what my options were. And to be really blunt I hoped that I could be a TA or I was told that I could possibly teach a course. Then when we got closer to the school year last year, all the courses were already assigned to people so we had to scramble to find something that I could do to support my fellowship. (Full-time student without RAships)

The following quotation indicates that some students more than others rely on funding not only to support their studies but also to support their families:

In the past two years there had been two research assistantships that have been posted just sent through the office downstairs and both times the timing was completely off for me. And I need to be bringing in some money for our family. I had to grab the language support assistantship when it was there because literally if I have said no I don't know what I would have had. And then this year again too, there were no research assistantships that I was aware of . . . so I signed up for language assistant position and then last week a really neat looking research assistantship came up and it was too late. So I had simply missed the boat just because of our family's financial status and then the nature of the full-time student and the hours that you need to have kind of claimed for the program. (Full-time student without RAships)

As evident, RAships can provide much needed financial support for full-time students; thus the requirement of coming to the project with existing skills may put some students at a disadvantage. Administrators recognized that students undertake assistantships for a variety of reasons: “For some grad students, they are very eager to learn and they are not so focused on funds and for others it can be critical to actually earn the money. We are trying to emphasize [to research supervisors] that doctoral students need to be educated and supported” (Administrator). Although the importance of RAships as financial support for students is recognized, the other administrator clarified,

[Research supervisors] will take students who will do their work for them and there is a training component to it but human nature being what human nature, is some people will give priority to those students with whom they worked before or who they feel can do it without a lot of training, without a lot of oversight. That’s probably less of an issue at the doctoral level than it is at the master’s level. (Administrator)

In some instances, however, it seemed that researchers viewed RA positions as employment rather than educational experiences meant to educate but also support students’ doctoral studies. One research supervisor provided a number of reasons why he would hire solely people with existing skills necessary to effectively complete assigned tasks during RAships:

They [doctoral students] have so many hours that are allocated in terms of a contract, it’s not indefinite, so within those hours they have to complete a number of tasks. And if a half of the time is taken up for me educating then obviously I’m paying for their education rather than paying for their service. I always have

found [it] unusual if doctoral students don't have some kind of prerequisite knowledge or skills coming in and being an RA. I ask why would they come and accept a job anyway and if it's only because they need the money it's not good enough for me. I mean I'm not going to give people my research money to help them pay for their rent. I think that's a systemic issue, it's important but it's not something I can solve through my research funding. (Research supervisor)

The above statement, contradicts to a certain extent one of the possible purposes of allocating internal or external funding to researchers. As indicated by one of the administrators, there is an obligation on the part of faculty members to provide training when they receive such funding:

So it's part of that requirement that they need to work with the students to help them develop skill. That is part of the GRAD fund criteria, it is not part of the R&D fund criteria but it is usually part of the SSHRC funding criteria. So the training component is an expectation. If the faculty members always do that, that's another question and it depends on the faculty member. (Administrator)

As evident from this section, three out of four doctoral students with RAships secured assistantships through informal means. In most cases, students were contacted directly by the researcher familiar with their work ethics or through recommendation from one researcher to another. Only one student secured RAships through a formal process of recruitment. The responses from these students were supported by responses from research supervisors who confirmed hiring RAs in informal ways. Three out of full-time students without RAships expressed lacking information about RAships and their



availability mainly because RAships are poorly advertised. Research supervisors also confirmed this argument.

### **Reasons for (Not) Becoming Research Assistants**

All four students who secured RAships said that gaining experience and securing income were two main reasons for becoming RAs:

First money and then experience; I wanted to gain experience with things that I didn't do before in research and I also wanted to practice things that I have done before and improve them. The funding itself wasn't enough in terms of buying the books, supporting the conferences, and other doctoral activities that we are expected to do. We didn't have money for that included in our funding package.

(Full-time student with RAships)

All four participants considered the financial support gained through RAships as very helpful with comments such as “the assistantships helped me to survive, to pay the bills” (Full-time student with RAships). One participant stated that although originally the RAships were about learning research and financial support was secondary, after her funding ran out, her motivation shifted to be more financial: “It's less about the experiences because I feel I have these experiences. If I took on anything else it would be more for the money” (Full-time student with RAships).

One of the participants said that originally she was not seeking RA opportunities but was invited by researchers to join their research projects: “In the beginning it wasn't me being motivated to be an RA. I wasn't seeking out these opportunities, they kind of fell on my lap when they came to me” (Full-time student with RAships). With time, however, she explained that it was these experiences that made her realize she was

gravitating more towards research than teaching, which led her to get involved in future RAships: “Even though I have been involved in teaching I find my natural tendencies, my interests, my passions are more geared to the research” (Full-time student with RAships).

Another participant explained that she was motivated to become an RA based on the accounts she heard from other students about great assistantships where students were offered opportunities to publish, present at conferences, and build mentoring relationships. On a similar note, another participant said that the main motivation to become an RA was to gather a variety of experiences that would help her to become a university professor.

Another full-time student indicated that she engaged in RAships mainly to learn how to do research from not only her supervisor but also other professors. It was important for the participant to learn in a practical setting about different methodologies, different ways of collecting data, and what is appropriate and when:

The experience, in terms of developing or enhancing my own skills, I started thinking about different skills I would like to enhance, whether critical thinking, coding, analyzing those sort of things. The idea of being able to contribute to a larger project was something that was kind of inspiring to me, thinking that it would be rewarding being part of something bigger that I can contribute to. Also, just curiosity in terms of learning more about the research process and how other professors go about doing research. I think broadening my connections so thinking about working with others and seeing their different approaches, different work styles. (Full-time student with RAships)

Full-time students without RA experiences listed a couple of reasons for not becoming RAs. The main ones included a lack of information about RAships, poor advertisement of RA positions, and low compensation for RAs. In one case, the student, who was advised by the supervisor to look for assistantships online, realized there were no RAship opportunities posted:

When I came last June my advisor said that I need to find a job and she directed me to a particular website where the assistantships were advertised. So my first choice was to apply for a teaching assistantship post and as a full-time student I got it. I realized that on the website they don't have research assistantships posted and I didn't know how to apply for them. (Full-time student without RAships)

On a similar note, another participant said,

For me, the reason for not becoming an RA would be lack of opportunity or lack of awareness even though I suspect the opportunities could have been there. If I had known where to look I could have been more aware. So one thing that I wrote here for myself is how can we refine the process as grad program so we can access the opportunities in a timely fashion. So to know about them, to know about them in time prior to making other commitments, and can there be an office or department that keeps track of which ones are being done and which ones are available. How we as graduate students find out about it. The program doesn't necessarily know about us because we are full time and part time from different geographic locations so is there a spot that we can go to see what's there. (Full-time student without RAships)

Two of the participants brought attention to the fact that they were looking for RAships at least somewhat connected to their own research interests:

I attended a seminar on RAships and there was an outline of possible RAships that were not even close to my area of study. A couple of professors there who I know and I would be interested working for them but at that stage they didn't have anything to offer. Because I've got some teaching positions I didn't pursue RAships any further. (Full-time student without RAships)

Two participants voiced the issue that RAships as opposed to teaching assistantships or teaching positions have lower compensation rates. One student, after inquiring about a specific RAship opportunity, concluded that the RAship did not pay well enough for the amount of work and commitment required. Ultimately pay and workload were the biggest deciding factors that led the two participants to not undertake RA positions:

To be honest I felt that the PhD was enough work on its own. I felt like my time, a lot of my time would be taken up by that and I didn't want to start interjecting other responsibilities. Had this other responsibilities paid very, very well I likely would have taken a different approach to it or looked at it differently but personally I didn't feel that what they were offering in pay was going to be worth my effort considering all other work that I had to do. (Full-time student without RAships)

In addition, one participant with a teaching background, admitted to be more interested in teaching positions rather than RA positions. She also said that her priority

was timely completion of doctoral studies, therefore she was concerned that taking too many projects at the same time could slow down her progress:

At this stage I don't think I have the time to do the teaching, take the courses, and pursue research assistantships . . . I guess because my background is teaching and I'm a teacher so I was very comfortable with teaching roles as opposed to research assistantships. It's not so clear to me what an RA does but it's really clear what a teacher does. (Full-time student without RAships)

Administrators also voiced that full-time students may be too busy to undertake RAships, especially if they are involved in teaching and focused on completing their studies in a timely manner:

I'm assuming that one reason might be that they are already doing TA work. They want to get teaching experience and some are preparing their comprehensive examinations so they need that teaching experience. They do their studies, TAships, and maybe that's why they don't have time for RAships. That's one thing and another thing might be that they want to finish as soon as possible because fees, tuition is so high. Even if you get some scholarship and then it runs out you wonder how you are going to pay for it and you have to register each term and pay each term. So people want to get things done and move on.

(Administrator)

This section brought attention to the reasons why full-time students became or decided not to become RAs. As evident, the four doctoral students who secured RAships identified gaining experience and securing income as main reasons for becoming RAs. These students also indicated that they were motivated to become assistants to (a) learn

research from someone other than their supervisors, (b) gain experience that would help in securing academic positions, (c) build mentoring relationships, and (d) have opportunities to publish or present at conferences. Full-time students without RA experiences identified lack of information about RAships, poor advertisement of RA positions, and low compensation for RAs as main reasons for not becoming RAs.

### **Engagement in Research Assistantships**

All full-time participants who worked as RAs reported engaging in more than one RAship during their doctoral studies (between two and five positions each). Three out of four participants mentioned having worked as RAs also during their master's studies, which indicates that the students already had certain understanding of how to secure RAships. These three students came to the doctoral program immediately after completing full-time master's degrees.

The experiences of the four participants were different in terms of the actual length of the assistantships and composition of team members involved in each project. However, all four participants reported being engaged (at least once) in a longer RAship (between 1 year and slightly over 2 years); their other assistantships were a series of short contracts on the same project (between 40 and 80 hours each) or short contracts on different projects. This means that every participant had a chance to be involved at least in one project for a longer period of time and engage in diverse tasks and activities (although not necessarily across the entire research cycle). As illustrated in the following quotation, participants valued the opportunity to experience and participate in multiple steps of the research cycle:

The second project was very neat because I actually got to see the whole research process right from putting in the SSHRC grant right up until the dissemination and I was also involved in some publications. It was neat to see the entire process and being overseen by professors who had the expertise and knew what they were doing. (Full-time student with RAships)

Three full-time students reported working with two or more research supervisors on their different assistantships; only one participant reported having all three RAships with the same supervisor. Three participants indicated working with their doctoral advisor on at least one of their assistantships. In terms of team members involved in the projects, all four participants indicated that some of their assistantships involved other team members beyond the RA and the research supervisor; however, only 2 of the participants had contact with the other team members. In two cases, participants explained that although some of their assistantships were part of larger projects with multiple RAs and multiple researchers, they had contact with their research supervisor only throughout the entire project. For example, one student explained,

I wish that I was a part of that larger dynamic for the second project so I would have a better sense of what was going on, what other people were doing, maybe how my work fed into the other pieces of the project because I didn't really get that sense. (Full-time student with RAships)

The other two participants expressed collaborating with other team members on more than one assistantship. The identified projects had a web of people that included different university researchers, teachers, school board members, and graduate RAs.

As evident from this brief section, all four participants who worked as RAs engaged in multiple RAships and had opportunities to work at least once on a project for a longer period of time (between 1 year and slightly over 2 years). Three students worked with different research supervisors and one student worked with the same supervisor on all assistantships. Three students reported working with their doctoral advisor on at least one of their assistantships. All four participants indicated that some of the projects they worked on involved other team members, but only two of the participants had contact with the other collaborators.

This brief section was meant to provide general information about the four full-time students' engagement in RAships as a lead in to the subsequent detailed sections.

### **Benefits of Working as Research Assistants**

Each full-time student who worked as an RA expressed benefiting from assistantships; even those who found their assistantships quite challenging recognized benefits attached to their experiences. Two of the participants stressed the importance of RAships in developing their identities as researchers and intensifying their drive to become competent researchers. The full-time students accredited to assistantships their research skill development, participation in a research community, and confidence to undertake their dissertation research. Other identified benefits included expanding knowledge in areas outside their own research interests, exploring preferences regarding working style and communication style, and learning what practices to model (or not) in the future. One of the participants explained,

Research assistantships can provide valuable experiences but that depends on the student and the professor. The professor has to be willing to be a teacher,



especially for someone who doesn't necessarily have the skills. So if there is an expectation of performance they have to be in the position to teach the RA how to do it. And it's very important that you are clear in terms of what your expectations are. (Full-time student with RAships)

Three out of four participants expressed preferring their longer RAships over short-term contracts. Involvement for an extended period of time allowed them to observe how the research unfolded and how each step interconnected: "I think that being a part of that long-term project had the most impact on me as a researcher only because I saw the whole project through so to see all the different steps of the project" (Full-time student with RAships). Engagement in longer projects where students had opportunities to experience diverse steps of a research cycle seemed to increase their confidence in doing research and therefore contributed to the development of their researcher identities:

In terms of when I started to feel a little bit more confident, I think that came after I have been in the 2-year project. I felt like I have seen the whole research process take place and I felt like I can go out and do that on my own. So that was a very meaningful experience but I don't think I realized that until I was done. Because I did have to reflect back on it to realize how beneficial it was to me. (Full-time student with RAships)

Students' preferences for working on longer RAship contracts connects to the research supervisors' desire for more funding to hire RAs for extended periods of time. In fact, all research supervisors agreed that internal funding allocated for research development of graduate students is limited and external funding is very competitive:

To me it's all or nothing, either you get external funding and you have a lot of money to hire a couple RAs even or you draw from things like the GRAD fund or the R&D fund so 1000 here 1000 there, not a lot. So it's either you have a jackpot or you have barely anything. (Research supervisors)

One of the supervisors, although recognizing the need for more funding, explained that short duration contracts were still valuable: "40 to 80 hours is a good chunk of time you can get quite a bit done with it." This supervisor believed that reasonably short periods of funding contributed to the progress of research projects and to the research development of RAs.

One of the students who was very vocal about the importance of RAships emphasized how one of his RAships made him feel valued member of a research community: "I have to say that this [RAship] is the first place that have recognized what I bring to the table and that I'm not just a warm body" (Full-time student with RAships).

One participant attributed her increased interest in research to the experience of presenting at an international conference, which was part of the RAship:

I think presenting at the international conference was a time when I realized that I do want to be a researcher. I came into this program probably with a different reason to complete my PhD. I just wanted to know more about education profession. I'm a teacher and I wanted to become a better teacher and instructor or professor. I wasn't sure whether or not I want to be a researcher. (Full-time student with RAships)

To that end, most of the interviewed research supervisors were dedicated to connecting students to a research community and co-presenting or co-publishing with them when feasible:

I see being an RA as becoming part of academic field. Personally, I volunteered for research opportunities to gain the experience, it was not about getting recognition. But I think that it is very nice to have a connection with somebody in the field who is well known because it does open doors for you that you do not have otherwise. So that networking was extremely important for me. And I would like to be able to do that for those that come with me. I think it is important to write papers with doctoral students and present with them [at conferences].

(Research supervisor)

Several full-time students reported working on RAship projects that were not closely related to their own research interests. However, as recognized by most, the content of the projects themselves provided new understandings for them:

It wasn't about specific tasks or activities, it was about what the project was about so the theme, the focus, the material that I was looking at. I was able to expand my knowledge, and that's where I was able to learn more about literature in those areas, about the key journals or key authors in those different areas, some of the theories and practices. So it was more about the topics and the content than the skills themselves. (Full-time student with RAships)

Two participants felt they gained broader knowledge about research and the areas of focus from their RAships, which potentially could link to their future work in academic or research positions:

I would say largely the biggest opportunity was acquiring new knowledge so it was about the knowledge that I have learned related to theory, to conducting research, and to practice. Even with the first project where I didn't get any credit, I did learn about academic writing so getting to understand about the writing process and how this specific academic went about constructing the piece of writing, different evolutions and stages and the development of ideas. So this will be useful to me if I secure an academic position. Learning about the research process in general so how professors do research. (Full-time student with RAships)

Administrators and research supervisors also recognized the importance of RAships as professional development spaces. Both groups outlined potential benefits for students working as RAs, including awareness of professors as researchers:

Even though the purpose of a doctorate is not employment directly, we would want students to have the kinds of skills that will allow them to be employable. We also hope that these skills [acquired within RAships] will help them in their studies because it is one thing to learn the theories but if you can apply the theories it's much more useful. So it's to offer them the opportunity to apply the theory to practice, opportunities to help them in their own research, opportunities to work more closely with faculty members, especially to understand what it is like to be a faculty member, a professor at the university. (Administrator)

One participant emphasized that regardless if the RAships were closely connected to her research interest or not, they all contributed to her doctoral dissertation. Some of the assistantships were closely connected to her research interest meanwhile others were

not: “Just doing literature reviews for that project really helped my literature review chapter for my dissertation. But there are other aspects from each of the other projects that had some impact on my doctoral research” (Full-time student with RAships). The administrators explained that an effort is made (for those who are going through a formal hiring process) to match research interests of researchers with research interests of graduate students who apply for an RA position. The intention is to pair students with researchers in their fields and thus maximize the benefits of the RAships for their doctoral work.

Two participants expressed being fully involved in their assistantships and dedicating extra time in order to get the most from their experiences:

I wanted to make sure that I deliver what the professor expected of me rather than breaking it down to the hours. So I would say that I probably worked more than what my contract was for but I feel that I learned a lot from these experiences.

(Full-time student with RAships)

Some participants, reported feeling supported during their assistantships and having built mentoring relationship as positive elements of the RAship experiences, which are explored in a later section.

As demonstrated in this section, all four full-time students with RAships recognized benefiting from their experiences. The students recognized that RAships contributed to the development of their research skills, the development of their identities as researchers, their participation in relevant research communities, and their confidence to undertake their dissertation research. Students also reported that assistantships allowed them to expand their knowledge in areas outside their own research interests, to explore

preferences regarding working and communication styles, and to learn what practices to model (or not) in the future.

### **Challenges Within Research Assistantships**

The full-time students identified different elements as challenges within RAsHips, including irregular meetings with their research supervisors (and other team members), solitary work, lack of community and support, limited research training, lack of acknowledgement, power dynamics, and issues related to collaboration on larger projects. Three full-time students listed irregular meetings with research supervisors and solitary work as challenges encountered during assistantships. The students explained that they had some check-in meetings online or face to face, but they wished for more frequent meetings to feel connected to the project: “[I experienced] a little bit too much independence where I wouldn’t have regular contact with that person for a number of months so I would have liked a little bit more regular contact” (Full-time student with RAsHips). Due to irregular meetings, RAs ended up feeling disconnected from the projects and overwhelmed with assigned tasks. As reported by one of the full-time students,

I didn’t see the end point because the projects were so big and there is so many things that I’m asked to do . . . . I was wondering if I can even accomplish this. Some of the things would be reading initial material to get myself familiar with the project, planning and mapping what needs to get done and how I will do it . . . . I wondered how do I even start that planning work, doing database searches, reviewing and reading hundreds of articles, summarizing sources and integrating them into different kinds of material and linking them with other work,

assembling and categorizing different information into binders along with my corresponding notes, writing annotated bibliographies, drafting sample documents and appendices. (Full-time student with RAships)

One RA described the experience on two projects as largely independent and voiced the need for a sense of community and support. She defined herself as an independent person but craved closer connection to the projects:

I would say that naturally I'm a very independent person so I don't mind working by myself but you know what, I'm already doing that for my dissertation and other kinds of things so I was really craving that sense of community or that sense of participation in a broader project and I didn't have that experience at all. (Full-time student with RAships).

She added that maybe if the projects involved multiple collaborating RAs that might have helped her to get through the work: "I could have felt like I can talk more openly with that person [another RA] about struggles with particular tasks, how can we work through it together, that sense of community and support" (Full-time student with RAships).

Another reported challenge, related to irregular meetings with research supervisors, was limited research training. Two students internalized the lack of training as their own responsibility and evidence of potential shortcomings in terms of their skills. One of the students expressed feeling accountable for meeting the research supervisor's expectations and hesitant to ask for assistance because of the supervisor's busy schedule:

I felt almost this internal pressure . . . I felt this sense of accountability and responsibility to that supervisor you know they are putting all of this trust and these expectations on me to get it done and yet somehow I have to figure out the

way to do it by myself. Often times I don't want to burden the supervisor because I know how much they already are doing, and how busy and stressed they are with their own work so I feel like I have to just figure it out on my own and go to the supervisor as a last resort. (Full-time student with RAships)

The other full-time student reported that not receiving a lot of training forced her to figure out how to complete some of the tasks on her own. The process of discovering how to complete certain tasks took longer than she anticipated. As a result, she felt guilty about spending extra time on learning rather than moving the project along:

Fact that there are limited funds available for that project and if I'm spending so much time on these tasks, then what's going to happen to the actual deeper analytical kind of work, which is more meaningful work than the technical work. But the technical work has to get done in order to support the next phase. So I was torn in terms of my feelings and I felt a little dissatisfaction with myself in terms of not being competent enough technologically to help speed things along a little bit further. (Full-time student with RAships)

Both RAs seemed very understanding of why research supervisors were not providing evidently needed research training. In both cases, the main justification related to professors' demanding work. Some research supervisors claimed responsibility for training RAs as evident in this quotation: "I feel that I have responsibility as a research supervisor to make sure that the RA is comfortable with the tasks and the deadlines for their completion. And there is this ongoing monitoring and support" (Research supervisor). At the same time, the majority of research supervisors and both administrators recognized high academic demands for professors' careers as a factor



influencing their level of participation in students' research development. For example, one research supervisor stated,

We are expected to provide that kind of supervision and training and where that can happen as part of the good mix [getting the project done and training RAs] that's great but to take it on I mean you may as well do it yourself if you end up spending a significant amount of time training the student. I have to admit that given the time pressure we are under, taking on a student who requires a lot of hands-on supervision and training is not a very attractive proposition.

One of the administrators thought that professors' levels of dedication to training future researchers might be connected to different stages in professors' careers:

At the beginning of their career, [professors] they need to be more focused on research and getting credit for their own research. Later on when they are tenured it may be easier for them to focus their attention on developing the student because they don't have to worry about their own survival once they are tenured. They tend to be driven anyway but that's less of an issue for them.

(Administrator)

Two full-time students with assistantships identified timing (in terms of scheduling meetings or respecting timelines by all involved) as a challenge, especially on projects involving several team members. As one full-time student stated, "I'm not afraid to go up to any faculty member, call them by their first name and say I need that at my desk by tomorrow but timing sometimes can be an issue, especially when people are not responding to their emails" (Full-time student with RAships).

Another challenge associated with larger projects was related to gaining agreement between several research team members and compromising on different working and writing styles:

In the project, when I worked with my supervisor and another doctoral student the way that they completed research I think all three of us had different ideas of how it should be conducted and how we should analyze the data. So I think just coming to a compromise between us . . . probably took a little bit longer than we have expected or wanted it too but it certainly did work out at the end. (Full-time student with RAships)

On a similar note, another full-time student reported that organization and communication issues led to challenging situations within the project when two researchers had divergent opinions:

The last research project wasn't as much organized as the other three and I felt a little bit lost sometimes and not sure what I should be doing. I think it just came down to the lack of organization. And for me because I'm an overly organized person . . . it was just different working style and that's where we bumped heads and the challenges occurred because we just had different working styles and the communication wasn't as strong as on the other projects . . . . I think when there is more than one PI you are always wondering, when they disagree, who should I listen to? And I think that could have been a logistical problem between the two investigators and shouldn't have been brought into RAships but I certainly did see that. That negotiation was tough for myself and the other doctoral student because

we just weren't sure who we were supposed to listen to. That was a challenge that we experienced. (Full-time student with RAships)

Two RAs expressed their frustration about not being fairly recognized for their work. They felt that although they performed advanced tasks and contributed significantly to the projects, they were treated as novices rather than collaborators and after the contracts were finalized they were not acknowledged properly for their efforts:

To me it feels like research assistants have no intellectual property. It's like with the contract you are signing all the rights to someone else. It seems like you are so much below [research supervisors]. And realistically, in many projects you are not just organizing things and assisting, you are not just helping them you are doing it for them. If I'm coding and doing the analysis for you then it seems more like we are co-researching. I mean it would be different if you would train me and I would do your data collection then call me an assistant. But if I bring the skills to the project and I'm involved in the analysis, writing, reporting I would say that's my intellectual property. That's my brain work not someone else's. I don't understand how it's acceptable that I do it and then someone else slaps their name on it. To me it's so wrong and makes me not want to participate. It makes me feel like I'm doing someone else's job. Well we are. (Full-time student with RAships)

In terms of tangible outputs from research assistants' work, one doctoral student considered challenging the fact that none of her assistantships offered publication or presentation opportunities. She emphasized that publications are very important for aspiring academics thus she hoped for such opportunities in her RAships:

I didn't have those standard traditional academic benefits of publishing or presenting out of that work [i.e., the RA project]. And talking with other students I heard from them about the opportunities they get to go to conferences because of their RAship or publish many things and in a way I crave that and wish I had that experience . . . . And that's maybe because of the stage of those different projects, where they were at when I came along. It's something I feel that was really missed and that I could benefit from. Instead, I had to look for those opportunities on my own so outside of the RAships. (Full-time student with RAships)

One full-time student spoke about physical challenges (e.g., headaches, eye strain) when completing RAship tasks on top of doctoral work. The RA did not anticipate these kinds of challenges, which affected completion of assigned tasks as well as her own doctoral work:

Just the long periods of time sitting, looking at the documents, reading off of the computer and so I ended up finding health issues that go along with that: eye strain, back pain, pinched nerves, those kind of things and I really didn't anticipate that. And then throughout that process kind of like midway I ended up developing a chronic condition with some chronic pain so it seemed to add to that because I'm sitting for long periods of time and I'm doing the same kind of tasks, very repetitive and I just found that I needed to take more frequent breaks or I needed to put that work aside for periods and when I came back to it after extensive periods of not working on it it's like re-learning and re-familiarizing yourself so you feel like using or wasting hours. (Full-time student with RAships)

Another challenge identified by two participants referred to research supervisors' personalities and their hierarchical attitudes towards students. Both RAs felt that their supervisors did not treat them as collaborators and were not interested in mentoring. The students expressed feeling disappointed with some of their RAships. One full-time student stated that although her research supervisor felt she was giving her a good educational experience just by allowing her to be part of the project, the reality was that the RA felt not accepted as a collaborator, not recognized for her work, and intimidated to voice her concerns:

This is going to really benefit you because you learn from me, the supervisor. But when I think back to it, no I had less motivation to continue as that project went along and even thinking about it now or recalling that experience, it felt really demoralizing. I almost wanted to block it out of my mind and forget about it because it was not an opportunity for me to grow. It's almost like I learned what not to do, how not to treat people rather than what to do. Even though I had looked at the person and thought this person is really an expert, they are really knowledgeable and I could see it through their writing and their ideas, but I felt like they didn't have that human dimension in terms of how to treat people or show reciprocity—a give and take in the relationship. So I did end up thinking about it as a painful and negative experience that I wanted to block out of my mind. (Full-time student with RAships)

Another student described herself as naïve to think that all assistantships are fair and beneficial for RAs:

I just thought that's a given that it shouldn't be a luxury to be treated nicely it should be a common practice. I just expected that I will be treated fairly like I didn't think that it would be an issue for me and that I would feel belittled. (Full-time student with RAships)

This section illustrates that full-time students experienced challenges within their RAships. The main challenges reported by students included irregular meetings with their research supervisors (and other team members), solitary work, lack of community and support, limited research training, lack of acknowledgement, power dynamics, and issues related to collaboration on larger projects. Two students identified their supervisors' personalities and hierarchical attitudes as challenging. These students felt that their supervisors did not treat them as collaborators and were not interested in mentoring. Fuller description of participants' relationships with their supervisors is provided in the following section.

### **Relationships with Research Supervisors**

It is important to note that each RA reported having multiple RAship experiences; therefore, one assistant could have experienced benefits and challenges within RAships as well as positive and negative relationships with their research supervisors. The majority of the full-time students with RAships wished for open and clear communication with their research supervisors. The students said that they expected their supervisors to provide an overview of the project up front in order to have a good understanding of the study and where their assistantship work fit. The students looked for clear statements of research supervisors' expectations, the kinds of skills that they would need to complete the assigned tasks, and what skills they would gain or enhance completing these tasks. It

is not surprising that graduate students were interested to enhance their existing skills during RAships since there is an increasing emphasis on the development of professional skills in graduate education (CAGS, 2008; M. Rose, 2012).

In addition, they expected clear detailed instructions about the tasks and expected completion deadlines. Participants also mentioned expecting fair and respectful treatment. As one full-time student expressed,

I would expect that person to be helpful, resourceful, and supportive so that they are not focusing only on the work itself but [also] that kind of climate of support, that I feel I can go to them, that there would be an open communication . . . . So the idea that I feel respected, that I feel I'm contributing, and they are appreciating and valuing the work that I'm putting in, that I'm being treated as a human being.

(Full-time student with RAships)

Two of the participants indicated a need for flexibility in terms of the timelines so that a research supervisor would take into consideration their other obligations (specifically their doctoral studies). They also mentioned the importance of availability and accessibility in terms of research supervisors making an effort to communicate on a regular basis, whether via phone, email, or in person. Another expectation was that supervisors would cultivate some kind of opportunity and space for RAs to feel that they benefited from their involvement whether that is through scholarly publications, presentations, writing references, or sharing resources.

As evident in the following paragraphs, some of the expectations listed by full-time students were fulfilled and some were not. Students reported different experiences

with their research supervisors, which influenced students' experiences as RAs and their development as researchers.

Three full-time students reported having positive relationships with their research supervisors. They experienced support and mentorship in most of their RAships. The supervisors were dedicated to provide the RAs with opportunities where they could grow as scholars. When asked about relationships with a supervisor, one of the RAs said, "I will use the words of my doctoral supervisor who said that he considered me more of a colleague than a student. Those are his exact words" (Full-time student with RAships). This aligns with a statement from another research supervisor:

I think my presumed role is one of the educator and promoter of students' development. I would hope that people I have worked with feel that I play that role but I also feel that . . . and maybe I don't know if this is appropriate or not but I often see good research assistants as being colleagues and I enter in relationships with them that involve co-publications and other activities that assume the equality of relationship. (Research supervisor)

One full-time student expressed gratitude towards her research supervisors for supporting her plans to become an academic and providing her with strategies and guidelines for publishing in peer-reviewed journals. She also mentioned the importance of the peer mentoring she experienced in one of her RAships:

Also working with other doctoral students was really amazing too because I found that we were able to mentor each other. Some students would have lots of strengths in one area and other doctoral students would have strengths in another so the peer mentorship was also very valuable. (Full-time student with RAships)



Two doctoral students in particular expressed being disappointed with some of their research supervisors. As one of them indicated, the relationship was very formal and completely task focused. The research supervisor just wanted to see results and the work get done. As the student explained,

The treatment, the tone, the interactions I think it comes with the person's personality, it was very hierarchical, I felt a lot of power differential between the supervisor and I'm the little student and just get the work done. I found that part hard to deal with. I would not characterize it as mentorship at all. I would say that person was too busy dealing with a lot of other things, other projects, health, administrative stuff, their own deadlines, and I came almost to feel like a second class like subhuman in the way that I was treated. (Full-time student with RAships)

Another RA also struggled to characterize her relationship with the research supervisor as a mentoring relationship. She reported feeling disappointed because of the lack of communication and mentorship:

It might be because there is no continued relationship. Maybe they don't see the value in investing time in teaching students research skills. I do hear a lot from other students saying the same thing. I think that my idea of mentorship and my supervisor may be different. For me, I would like to build on my weaknesses and if they see that something could be improved it would be nice for them to point that out. I know that she felt graduate students were lucky to even be working with her. So maybe she thought that she was a good mentor. I don't know. (Full-time student with RAships)

One of the full-time students explained that the hierarchical order and high expectations were very clear from the first meeting. However, looking for an opportunity to grow as a researcher, she ignored the warning signs and decided to try the experience:

[The research supervisor] ended up saying right when I came in, one of the first things I won't forget, it just stays in my mind, this is my project and I will be the sole author on everything that there is no possibility for you to publish or to co-author with me . . . I tell you that at the beginning so that it's clear to you from day one. So the message that I really got from that comment . . . it kind of struck me off guard and I was thinking wow. I almost saw my role like I'm a behind-the-scenes supporter, but I won't be getting any credit for the kind of work that I will be doing. I almost felt a little bit like a ghostwriter. (Full-time student with RAships)

In the following meeting, the research supervisor also made the RA promise that she would stay on the project and not quit as the other RAs had done in the past. The participant reported that the supervisor said,

I need a commitment or a promise from you that you are going to stick it out that you won't quit this project half way through or leave before all of the work is done on this project. I had other RAs that have left me and it has been such a pain to start over, to find someone new, I lose time, I lose the momentum on the project, so promise me right from the beginning that you are going to see this through.

This kind of overpowering request put extra pressure on the assistant and made her feel trapped in the project:

After this second comment, I felt all this pressure like I thought to myself well, I'm not a quitter, I don't quit things and I see them through, so it's hard for me to think about quitting, but at the same time I thought it's hard for me to foresee what may happen in the course of that project. So it just seems like can I make this kind of promise, is that appropriate to say that to someone when you are just starting off? . . . I don't know. I just felt very off put by that kind of comment. I don't even know what the project is all about so what am I committing to? (Full-time student with RAships)

Two full-time students felt that they were not able to freely express their concerns. Based on the treatment and interaction with the research supervisors, both students decided to suffer in silence rather than express their concerns. As one of the students summarized, "overall, [my assistantship] I would say was highly negative and over time I came to feel unhappy, unsatisfied, and unfulfilled" (Full-time student with RAships). Another full-time student said that although her research supervisor talked about communication and collaboration, it was not evident in the practice. Whenever the participant made a comment that did not align with the supervisor's opinion, she felt disregarded. As a result, the participant decided to avoid situations that could create an awkward relationship with that individual and could continue even after the project ended:

You can't voice anything to anyone because you don't know who is connected to whom and if you want to stay in this university you probably don't want to burn any bridges. And the PhD is very long so you are surrounded by the same people for a very long time. So regardless of your experience, I feel that there is really no

one you can voice that, even reporting that to a chair of the program is not an option because at the end of the day you are a student and they are all colleagues.

So you can't say anything to them. (Full-time student with RAships)

One of the RAs reported that she had asked colleagues for advice on how to approach the research supervisor and voice her concerns but in the end felt too intimidated to confront the research supervisor:

I thought to myself like what can I say? And how can I say it? How do I go about having that kind of dialogue, especially when the interactions with that individual have been so hierarchical and those messages from the beginning were put there in my mind including "don't quit," and "don't expect anything" so I felt like I had no space to talk about that. I felt very vulnerable and almost a little bit intimidated so I felt that no, I can't talk about it openly with that person, especially just starting out in the program. (Full-time student with RAships)

In one case, the research supervisor was also the RA's course professor, which put extra pressure on the student. The full-time student worried how her relationships with the research supervisor could potentially influence her performance within the doctoral course:

I felt this double burden that they are teaching me and are responsible for my grade in that course and at the same time, I'm their RA. So there was also this pressure if I start speaking out or being negative is that going to impact my grade or my ability to get through the program? (Full-time student with RAships)

The full-time students' comments are supported by administrators who indicated that working on RAships with doctoral advisors or course instructors may pose additional tensions for doctoral students. One administrator explained,

It can work well or it can be too much reliance on one person. At the end of the day, they write your reference letter and they make comments about you if someone is looking for an RA or TA . . . you have to be careful because those are things that are never said but they can influence how things are. It's always true in the workplace but it's even more when you are vulnerable in that regard because you count on good will. (Administrator)

In addition, two RAs thought that talking with their supervisors or reporting their situations to someone else could potentially affect their reputation with the department and result in other researchers being hesitant to offer them RAship opportunities in the future. As one student said, "it could change people's impressions of me, people may be more hesitant to offer opportunities to me, that person could end up speaking negatively out against me" (Full-time student with RAship).

One full-time student spoke about the RAship experience as not worth her time and efforts. Moreover, the participant said that the RAship made her lose other learning and employment opportunities:

I ended up with learning what not to do. I don't feel like I could approach that person for a reference letter. As a full-time student that also put me in a disadvantage because that could have been someone who would recommend me for something or I could have collaborated with that person even doing future

projects for free but it didn't work out like this at all. So I feel like I lost more than I gained; it came at a very high cost for me. (Full-time student with RAships)

The nature of the relationships that some of the full-time students expressed having with their research supervisors portrays power dynamics within RAships. In fact, several participants from all three groups (doctoral students, research supervisors, and administrators) recognized the existence of power dynamics within RAships. One of the researchers explained that it may take time to establish relationships where students see themselves as “partners on the projects” rather than subordinates:

I know this is not an issue anymore with my first RA but I felt very uncomfortable starting with this RA a month ago about the power dynamic. I don't think she fully gets it yet but she also has some cultural differences so I sense just from her body language she is still feeling that I'm the one who is telling her . . . I'm the boss so to speak. So I hope that she will see that's not the case. So about the relationship with RAs is this power piece, I have to remind myself that it takes time to get rid of some of those assumptions or to work through some of those assumptions. I hope I don't come across that way but they are just there, the institutional assumptions. (Research supervisor)

As evident, students had different experiences with their research supervisors. Due to their multiple RAships, some students experienced positive relationship with one supervisor and negative relationship with another research supervisor. Three of the four full-time students talked about positive relationships where they felt supported and mentored by their supervisors. They reported that positive relationships with their research supervisors influenced their experiences as RAs and their development as

researchers. Two students identified some of their relationships with research supervisors as unsatisfactory due to formal and task-focused dynamics, lack of mentorship and communication, and perceived power dynamics. Both students expressed feeling unable to voice their concerns to their research supervisors or anyone else.

### **Educational and Ethical Research Assistantships**

I asked participants what ethical and educational RAships meant for them. As evident from Chapter Four, several documents (internal and external) encourage educational and ethical RAships. There are also guidelines pertaining to respectful partnerships (Faculty document, 2014) and commitment to students' welfare (AERA, 2011). Therefore, I was interested to discover my participants' understandings about educational and ethical RAships and the extent to which student RAs considered their experiences as such.

The majority of full-time students with RAships envisioned educational RAships to increase their research knowledge and skills. Two students identified learning about the responsibilities associated with being professors as an educational component of their RAships. In terms of RAships being ethical, students expected they would be treated fairly, be recognized for their work, and feel valued. They also voiced the need for reciprocity and mutual benefits. The following quote sums up well the overall comments of full-time students:

I would say educational to me would mean that by the end of that assistantship the RA can end up saying that they had a positive experience, that their skills and knowledge and professional development has been positively enhanced. In terms of an ethical RAship, I would say is one where the RA feels that they have been

treated fairly and humanly, that the interactions are supportive between them [RA and the research supervisor] and all the other people involved, that there is care and kindness involved, that the policies and procedures have been adhered to that they feel they were hired, paid appropriately so all of those processes have been followed. And that there is a space for that assistant to contribute and that they feel valued, recognized, and appreciated for the work they have done. So there is this sense of reciprocity that goes along with it, that there are mutual benefits not only for the project and for the supervisor but also for the assistant. (Full-time student with RAships)

Research supervisors listed similar elements when describing educational and ethical RAships:

Educational in a sense that an RA has the opportunity for professional development within the framework of the relationship with the supervisor.

Ethical, for example giving the RAs opportunity to be recognized for their work and not to use students' contributions without proper acknowledgement. I think that RAship relationship should be quantifiable for a student and able to be reproduced for example on their CV as a real contribution as opposed to a support role. (Research supervisor)

One of the researchers emphasized that RAships may serve as an important part of the students' doctoral program since many activities and contributions can eventually be used as evidence of students' development as scholars. The research supervisor also added that the program by design requires that assistantships be educational and ethical and "if this is not the case then there is something wrong and we are not doing justice to



the philosophy of our doctoral program” (Research supervisor). This research supervisor also added,

I think that the educational and ethical pieces are separate because I’m sure that there are many examples where you have one but not the other. I address the ethical piece first because what I do right from the beginning is to make an RA understand that they are a partner in this piece . . . . And I also let them know that just because your name wasn’t a co-investigator on the REB doesn’t mean that you are not perceived as such; you are part of the team. Educational part, I think that goes without saying that they are in it to learn about research and about the topic under investigation. And mutual respect, communication, generosity are very important. I’m so proud when I look at my first RA’s CV and I see how many co-published things we have or co-presented things. (Research supervisor)

Discussing educational and ethical RAships, two research supervisors also mentioned the importance of helping students to maintain balance and reminding them that their main purpose is timely completion of their programs:

[RAships] can of course get in the way because there might be a tendency for some students to take on more than they should although their priority is to get the dissertation done and to graduate. As long as they are doing work that contributes to their professional growth that is a plus, but at a certain point it could become detrimental to them completing their programs. Each individual student needs to find the balance so that they don’t delay the completion of their studies. (Research supervisor)

Being mindful of their other agendas and balancing their time . . . . I would love to give each of them more time and more opportunities but backing off during the summer and letting my research assistant finish writing her first draft was hard. So balancing their time and working within the restrictions is essential. (Research supervisor)

Both administrators emphasized that RAships should definitely be educational and ethical. One administrator claimed, “The ethical part is the hard part. There are power differentials and faculty members are their own unique individuals so some are easier to work with than others” (Administrator). The other administrator identified some of the reasons that may prevent RAships from being ethical and educational:

I would say very often busy schedules on both sides because academia is a busy environment, everything is hectic and it’s becoming even more hectic. There is this feeling of “more is better” and not many academics are resisting this. And another reason is lack of communication and that lack of communication sometimes may come from people not knowing how important it is to clarify things early on. It can be also the power issues. Sometimes students may feel that they want to make a good impression and they are afraid to ask for clarifications or share their expectations with their supervisors. So it is important to talk about mutual expectations during the first meeting. What would you like to get out of this contract or this experience? (Administrator)

After clarifying what educational and ethical RAships meant, the full-time students also responded to my question about whether they did or did not consider their RAship experiences educational and ethical:

I would say in both cases [my assistantships] yes, educational. I expanded my knowledge of theories, research practices by reading, by looking through the literature, by reviewing, having meetings with the individuals. But that was to a certain degree, maybe not to a full potential of being educational. I hadn't had a chance to be involved in the whole research process to see the whole research cycle so that's something that I would really enjoy and could have benefited educationally seeing the whole development from the beginning stages right through to the end through to those publications and dissemination. And just to have that sense of the wider scope of the projects. I think that's important and useful for the research assistant to have that understanding so that they don't see their work as just this tiny little piece but they really recognize the importance of that piece to the bigger puzzle of what's happening within the project. (Full-time student with RAships)

Overall, all four students considered their experiences as educational. However, some assistantships did not meet students' full expectations and others were educational in terms of what not to do. The statement about learning from assistantships "what not to do" goes along with a comment made by one administrator, who pointed out that less positive experiences also include learning: "Sometimes things are educational in a negative sense because you learn about politics of everything involved and how to deal with different personalities . . . but that's a good thing as well because that's the way the world works."

Another full-time student emphasized that both parties (RA and research supervisor) bring skills to assistantships and, therefore, RAships offer mutual educational experiences:

All my research assistantships were educational but often it was me teaching my supervisor. So the educational component doesn't have to be a one way, it can be bidirectional. My doctoral supervisor used to say that working with students was as much of a learning exercise for him as it was for them. (Full-time student with RAships)

In terms of RAships being ethical, responses varied among full-time students. Some students praised their supervisors for treating them as equal collaborators and investing extra time in their professional development. One of the full-time students brought attention to reciprocity as an ethical element within RAships. The reciprocity, according to the student, was evident in the researchers' commitment to developing her identity as a researcher and building her profile as an academic:

My projects were extremely ethical. One thing that I really appreciated was the reciprocity and that I was given the opportunity to learn and to publish. For better or for worse, publications are the currency of academia so being able to publish and learn through these experiences with the professors and PIs [principal investigators] I thought it was one of the most ethical things to do . . . not only are you getting paid but you are also kind of building your identity and your career as an academic. (Full-time student with RAships)

Another full-time student reflecting about educational and ethical assistantships, expressed that researchers do not have the same dedication to students' professional

development as they do to their own careers. She noted that professors seem to be very dedicated to promoting their careers and securing tenure-track positions and progressing from assistant to associate to (full) professors; however, they do not have the same dedication to promoting doctoral students' future careers. The student argued that especially at the doctoral level it should be clear that students need to show tangible outcomes for their effort and be recognized since soon they will be looking for jobs. Therefore, creating opportunities for students to engage in conference presentations, publications, and outside university networking should be a priority for research supervisors who wish to engage in educational assistantships:

As doctoral students we are always trying to build our reputation too. It's not just about experiences but things need to be documented, there has to be some proof and that's why we are pushed to publish or attend conferences. So I don't understand why for research assistantships there is often no acknowledgement or that it's so up to the supervisor to acknowledge you or not. (Full-time student with RAships)

As partially illustrated in previous sections about challenges within RAships and relationships with research supervisors, some full-time students did not consider their RAships to be ethical. In fact, from the conversations with students, it was evident that the ethical element was highly dependent on research supervisors. According to full-time students, the ethical aspect was influenced by two main factors: (a) how the supervisors treated RAs, and (b) how much time and effort the supervisors were willing to invest in making the RAships beneficial for RAs. For example, one participant reported the following,

I would say for the first [RAship] no, it was not ethical at all. I felt like I learned from it what not to do, how not to treat people, and if I'm ever in the position of being a supervisor I would recall that experience and make sure that my RAs feel supported, that there is a space for them to contribute, that there is reciprocity so the emphasis on the individual, the human being rather than on the skills. In my case, I feel like [my research supervisor], because I had good writing skills, they saw that they could benefit from me rather than considering reciprocity and a mutually beneficial exchange between us. The second one I would say yes, it was ethical. There was more space for me to contribute, to have conversations whether it's about the project or wider conversations about what's going on. (Full-time student with RAships)

Two students voiced lack of recognition for their contributions as unethical practice encountered in their RAships. Both students were disappointed that research supervisors did not put their names on work to which they contributed significantly through data analysis and writing. As one full-time student explained, "if I would publish something with you and wouldn't put your name on it that would be considered so wrong but then why it's okay to do that with RAs." Another student added, "Just because the position is being paid it seems like you are losing the right to your piece of the intellectual property. It doesn't seem very ethical" (Full-time student with RAships).

To summarize students' understandings about educational and ethical RAships, the majority of students with RAships expected educational RAships to (a) contribute to the development of transferable knowledge and skills, and (b) enhance their understanding of what being a researcher entails. In terms of ethical RAships, students

expected fair treatment, reciprocity, mutual benefits, and recognition for their work. The four students who worked as RAs considered their experiences as educational, although sometimes in terms of what not to do. With respect to RAships being ethical, some students felt treated as equal collaborators, supported by supervisors who were committed to their development as researchers, mentored, and recognized for their contributions. Some students expressed lack of recognition and mentorship, and as a result they did not consider their assistantships to be ethical. It was evident in students' responses that ethical RAship experiences highly depended on research supervisors.

### **Impact of Full-Time Status (and Other Factors) on Research Assistantships**

Full-time students were asked if and how their full-time status influenced their experiences with RAships. They were also asked if there were any other factors, beyond student status, that may have played a role. Full-time students with RAship experiences indicated that their status allowed them to fully immerse in doctoral work, to be regularly on campus, and to build relationships within the scholarly community. They all agreed that being on campus made them visible and led to increased access to educational opportunities (including RAships) through interactions with professors and staff. For example one of the students stated the following,

Being at the university gives you a better connection with the faculty and just networking with other professors and getting to know them and even just casual talks when you are photocopying. I had an experience recently when a professor was talking about a research project and I said that I have a similar research interest and design project I'm doing and she offered me a position just over my photocopying moment. I declined because I have quite a lot going on at this time

so I didn't feel I have a time to devote to that project although it sounds amazing. Again, it's about having more access because you are networking with people and finding out what people are doing whereas when you are working remotely you don't get those experiences. And it's only when emails are sent out and they are looking for RAs when you probably get quite a few people applying and maybe have less chance to secure that position. (Full-time student with RAships)

The argument about regular visits on campus increasing students' chances of getting involved in educational assistantships is reflected in a comment made by one of the researchers:

The full-time students seem to become more of a part of the learning community, the part-time students as well, but the full-time students they are here, they are around, you see them in the hall, and you start thinking on other activities they could work with you on. So this pulls them more to the network. If they are around we very quickly pull them into our community, to the academia. While if they are not here, we just don't see them. (Research supervisor)

One of the two students who switched from full-time to part-time studies due to family circumstances also shared the view that full-time status provides students with closer connections to faculty members:

I think that full-time status gives you the opportunity of being more connected with the entire faculty whereas now being part time I'm still connected with my supervisor and my committee. We still have very similar relationship and I still probably put in the time of being a full-time student. Now, I do my work at home rather than at school. I think that being connected to a bigger community has



changed but my close support system for me hasn't changed. (Full-time student with RAships)

Another participant indicated relationships with researchers and reputation within the Faculty as factors that influenced her access to RAships. Both factors relate to previously mentioned regular visits on campus. Being around and networking offers unique opportunities to learn about professors' research interests, the projects they are doing, potential RA opportunities that may become available, and other educational opportunities:

Having a relationship with faculty influences it because my last research assistantships were not even posted; I was just asked. [It is about] the relationships with people and your reputation within the department. If I was known as a great research assistant then maybe I would get more positions, I don't know. Those factors definitely play a role. (Full-time student with RAships)

A comment from one administrator confirms the arguments about the importance of being visible and building quality reputation within the department:

I have noticed that students who are present here and make themselves available because you need to be known to people otherwise you are unknown. So they need to be physically present and they need to do a good job. I think that PhD students need to realize that they are more peers when they are doctoral students, I don't think they feel like that necessarily but it should be more of an equal relationship and students need to think of it that way a little bit. In practice, of course you have the power differential so we can say anything we want but students need to be available and they need to present themselves as being

capable and willing to learn quickly and be able to work independently. Then there will be work that comes to them. So these are factors that influence it [access to research assistantships]. (Administrator)

One full-time student stated that full-time students, who do not have the obligation of full-time employment, have more flexibility to engage in assistantships than students with full-time employment: “I have more flexibility as a full-time student and I can be on campus, I can travel [as part of RAship activities] . . . meanwhile having a job you can’t” (Full-time student with RAships).

Two participants reported that the limitation of working 10 hours per week as full-time students influenced their access to RAships. According to the students, they would be interested in and capable of undertaking more assistantships. They also believed that it should be their decision how many hours they can work during their program:

I would say it was just basically restricted in the number of hours that I can do. So the 10 hours a week in a way almost felt like a disadvantage to me because I couldn’t hold multiple research assistantships at the same time if the one was 10 hours a week. So I got an overview of one project rather than overview of different projects or opportunities to participate in a variety of assistantships. I felt like if I would be a part-time student I could have more assistantships. (Full-time student with RAships)

This perspective goes along with a research supervisor comment:

I always thought that graduate students should choose how many hours they work. If they are working with a supervisor that is in their area then they would

probably benefit to work 20 hours per week. I think there should be some flexibility with the hours. (Research supervisor)

Participants without RA experiences also had the opportunity to share how full-time status (and other factors) influenced their access to RAships. I was interested to discover if and how their status influenced their decisions not to undertake RAships or potential lack of RAship opportunities. Similar to students with assistantships, one student without experience as an RA also recognized the positive impact of being full time in terms of becoming aware of what RAship opportunities are available on campus and being flexible in terms of time to take advantage of them:

Being visible matters because I know that there is a number of professors in the program that know me more than they know part-time students that are in my cohort. Because I'm here and I went to many workshops and sessions last year so then you start to become known. The advantage that I have over part-time students is the flexibility I have during the day. I stay busy with the things that I'm working on but if an RAship would have been available let's say between 9 a.m. and 3 p.m. I could access that meanwhile many part-timers would not simply because during that time they are doing their regular job. (Full-time student without RAships)

Overall, the responses from the four students without RAships were divided between those who explained being not interested in assistantships because of the demanding full-time studies workload and those who were looking for RAship opportunities. As already discussed in the section "Reasons for (Not) Becoming Research

Assistants,” some full-time students declared missing RAships due to ineffective advertisement of available opportunities.

One participant was particularly concerned with finding the actual time to take on an RAship: “I’m full-time, so I qualified to accept a research assistantship, but I chose not to because yes, I already felt like I had a lot to do as a full-time student (i.e., my own research and teaching)” (Full-time student without RAships). Other students also referenced the demanding workload of the program; however, they indicated they were looking for opportunities to become RAs. The influence of demanding workload was also pointed out by one of the administrators:

Sometimes students are just too busy or when they are doing the TAs they can’t be doing the RAship at the same time. We always try to have money available [for research assistantships] in May because they are less likely to have those other obligations. (Administrator)

In contrast to full-time students with RAships, the full-time students without them also voiced other factors that influenced their access to RAships. First of all, family financial situation was reported as a factor contributing to the level of students’ urgency in accessing RAships. Two students explained that they had comfortable financial situations therefore they were not pressured to seek employment and were able to fully focus on their studies. However, another full-time student highly relied on the income coming from the assistantships in order to support his family. The full-time student actively looked for employment opportunities on campus and engaged in whatever opportunities became available. As indicated in Chapter Four, one part of doctoral students’ funding packages requires them to work as teaching assistants, RAs, language

assistants, or instructors. The following quote illustrates one student's pressure to secure employment:

It is unique to individuals because I have colleagues in the program that their spouses work or they are in financial situation where the income is nice but it's not essential for their family's financial planning. So for me, I had to feel that pressure point that okay I need something, I don't know if there will be something else and then I don't know if that [\$]7,000 will be forfeit if I don't do anything. I would assume that it would be because it's an employment. (Full-time student without RAships)

As reported by one researcher, the priority in hiring RAs goes to full-time students:

I do [look first to hire full-time students as RAs] because we are recommended to seek out full-time students because of the financial challenges that full-time may experience. Therefore, they require the money more than potentially part-time students. We have always been told to access full-time students first and then if you can't find anyone appropriate then access someone part time. (Research supervisor)

One full-time student attributed his flexibility to undertake RAships (if one would become available) to his financial freedom and the fact that his children were older. Therefore, not only his full-time status but also his family situation were recognized as factors contributing to his ability to engage in RAships at any time. Meanwhile, another student expressed the necessity in his life to maintain balance between doctoral studies and his family life. As he explained, his time had to be well managed and divided

between the two: “they are both important . . . my kids are at home they are as committed to what I’m doing as I’m but I still have to be as committed to them. So the tension is always there” (Full-time student without RAships).

As evident in the responses from full-time students without RAships, full-time status along with family circumstances (financial and parental status) did influence their decisions to undertake (or not) RAships and their potential lack of assistantship opportunities.

### **Regulations and Practices Specific to Research Assistantships**

It is evident from the interviews with full-time students who had RAships that in several assistantships, research supervisors provided them with documents (e.g., research proposals, ethics applications, coding schemes, confidentiality forms, etc.) that would enhance their understanding of the project and tasks they were expected to complete. One of the students expressed the usefulness of becoming familiar with an ethics application and the AERA ethical standards:

The most influential was probably the REB manual and AERA also has one about conducting ethical research, which I also read. These documents helped me the most just to make sure that I was conducting the ethical research and I was meeting the needs of the participants. (Full-time student with RAships)

Beyond the documents mentioned in the above paragraph, full-time students could not recall being exposed to any other documents specific to RAships except the contract of employment. As one student said, “No, I have not come across any documents. I know that there are seminars at the beginning of each year but I’m not aware of any documents” (Full-time student with RAships).

The full-time students' statements correspond with data gathered from the interviews with the research supervisors. Two out of five research supervisors identified specific documents guiding their practice within RAs. These documents included a program document and a university document describing responsibilities of students, an external document providing information about ethical engagement in research, and Faculty guidelines around hiring RAs. One of the two research supervisors stated,

I have consulted the Faculty of Graduate Studies document on graduate students in terms of their responsibilities and the rights that they have as well. I have consulted the tri-agency document with respect to graduate student training and some of the experiences they would like students to have as researchers in training. (Research supervisors)

The other research supervisors indicated that they relied upon their past experiences as RAs and followed their own instincts to guide their RAs. For example, one research supervisor explained what guided her practice within RAs:

I think about my previous life as an RA and what propelled me forward, where those opportunities were. I was treated with respect, and my skill set was a valued contribution so I kind of try to emulate that. There were also RAs where I was expected to work with unreasonable deadlines so I found it difficult to maintain the balance. Being an RA and feeling like I have to get that done by someone else's deadline was not a good feeling. So that's the practice that guides my RAs, making sure that it fits with their plan, my plan, we all have that understanding. (Research supervisors)

Both administrators also reported limited documents related to RAships. As indicated in Chapter Four, during the time of collecting data for this research study, a handbook specific to RAships was released but participants were not familiar with it. The purpose of the handbook was to inform stakeholders about ways to engage in educational and ethical RAships and respectful partnerships. One administrator indicated,

I don't think we have anything specific. I haven't had a good look at the research assistantship handbook. We do have regulations in terms of rights and responsibilities of students . . . . I don't think we have anything specific for research assistantships. We have timesheets and the GRAD form has the expectation that it is an educational experience for students. (Administrator)

Three students, who secured their RAships through an informal recruitment process, expressed their unawareness of how assistantships are organized and formally distributed:

I would say that as a student I was largely unaware how assistantships are organized or distributed because my experiences happened in an informal way through the invitation. I just didn't know how you get research assistantships.

They just seem to come to me. I could really say it's not an obvious or transparent process for me. It's not something that I'm aware of. (Full-time student with RAships)

The full-time students with RAship experience called for regulations specific to RAships. The students voiced the need for more transparent and fair distribution of RAships. Although the four full-time students had more than one RAship, they



recognized that not all students have a chance to secure them. According to one of the students, the opportunities should be advertised to all students:

I don't even know what are the regulations outlined by the university regarding research assistantships. I know that often the research assistantships are being offered out of convenience rather than being advertised. When we have conversations in the grad lab, you learn that there are research assistantships in process that you never even heard about them. They were never advertised so how these students got the positions. It seems like favouritism . . . but is it about having effective assistants or providing learning opportunities because if it's about learning then everyone should have a chance since we all pay the same tuition. (Full-time student with RAships)

Another full-time student restated the need for a fair distribution of RAships, but also called for regulations regarding the focus and outcomes of RAships:

It was useful that I got research assistantship as a full-time student . . . to be a part of someone else's research and see their work. I think that's valuable but I think it needs to be regulated. I think that the distribution should be more of a fair process. In terms of organization, I think researchers should clearly say what skills can you learn being part of a specific assistantship rather than what skills you need to have to become research assistant . . . and students should state what skills they would like to develop. Not only what skills you already have and what the supervisors are looking for but it should be a learning process. As I said before, I want to do the project where I can work on my weaknesses because if I

only work on projects where I utilize my current skills when will I learn the other skills in a practical environment? (Full-time student with RAships)

Three out of four full-time students with RA experience considered the 10 hours per week regulation as unhelpful and one student supported the 10-hour rule. As stated earlier, some of the students believed that at the level of doctoral studies they should be able to decide how many hours of employment they can undertake without interfering with their program. As one student explained, some periods during the program are slower than others, which would allow flexibility to work over 10 hours per week:

I noticed that the department got stricter on how many [assistantships] can you be involved in and how many hours. So that was a little bit frustrating, I felt like the department was trying to decide what I can be involved in whereas I think it should be up to the researcher or a student what they can handle. As you probably know, you have down times in your dissertation and you have very busy times so when you are submitting your chapters to your committee and they are going through them so it's a down time and I was thinking that I could take more on but because I have a limitation of the 10 hours I couldn't take more. (Full-time student with RAships)

Meanwhile, one participant expressed a divergent view on the 10 hours per week regulation. The student stated that the 10-hour rule should be applied strenuously, especially at some stages of doctoral studies to limit interference with students' timely and successful degree completion:

The university is giving you a lot of money so this rule is to protect their investment. I will tell you that in my first full academic year I ended up working

15 hours per week but I was able to demonstrate that it didn't interfere with my studies. I would say that unless the student is able to demonstrate that they can actually manage and get all their work done then extensions shouldn't even be considered. And the other thing is that students in the program shouldn't even be allowed to have research assistantships between the final research course and defending their comprehensive examinations. And I also question how much students should be allowed to work after their data collection is done and they go to write up their thesis. I would almost say that there are certain periods when funded PhD students shouldn't even be allowed to do research assistantships so they could solely focus on their studies. (Full-time student with RAships)

Full-time students who did not work as RAs shared similar views regarding regulations pertaining to RAships. The students believed that RAship opportunities should be better advertised and fairly distributed. Although some of the students were aware of the recruitment process, overall they seemed to lack information about roles and responsibilities of RAs and research supervisors:

I don't know anything about [RAships]. I shouldn't say anything, I know very little about them. Other than that one workshop I attended, about a year ago, where I heard about some research assistantships that I had zero interest in. (Full-time student without RAships)

Overall, full-time students with and without assistantships expressed limited knowledge regarding regulations pertaining to RAships. The four students with RAship experience called for regulations (a) clarifying what RAships are about and what they should deliver and (b) explaining roles and responsibilities of RAs and research

supervisors. The students also expressed the need for more transparent and fair distribution of RAships. Research supervisors and administrators reported limited documents related to RAships.

### **Participants' Recommendations**

The full-time students with and without RAships provided recommendations about ways to improve access to RAships and enhance assistantships as research learning spaces. The responses from students are complemented with the recommendations from research supervisors and administrators. It is interesting to notice that most of the recommendations align between the three groups of participants.

The majority of students called for a fair process of assigning RAships and indicated that the positions should be posted online for everyone to know what is available and when researchers are hiring RAs. As one student pointed out, RAships should be advertised as effectively as teaching assistantships: "I will recommend that there should a better communication regarding research assistant opportunities. So somebody needs to be broadcasting constantly the research assistantships . . . same way like teaching positions" (Full-time student with RAships).

Students argued that everyone at some point of their program should have the opportunity to work as an RA. One student even suggested that RAships could become a mandatory component of the program:

Well, because of my positive experiences as an RA, I think it would be very beneficial for it to be mandatory for doctoral students at some point of their PhD, maybe even after they finish their courses. So at least they have some theory in terms of what they are doing. (Full-time student with RAships)

Two students added that fair distribution should be reinforced especially because the funding for many projects comes from internal or external funds that require researchers to provide research training for students. Therefore, it is only fair that every student would have equal access: “If the money is coming from SSHRC or any other public funding source then every student should have an equal opportunity. It shouldn’t be a question whether or not a professor knows somebody” (Full-time student with RAships).

To facilitate fair distribution of RAships, full-time students recommended keeping a record of who is getting RAships. The suggestion was to have some sort of database that allows recording of who had RAships, how many hours, and what benefits were provided to students:

I also think they should keep track of who had RAships and who hasn’t. If you always give opportunities to the same people then how those with no experience should get one . . . . They should be tracking how many RAships each person has had and maybe even what kind of experiences they are getting. Now that’s if it’s about learning otherwise they can continue doing what they want. But we need to be clear what the purpose of RAships is. My whole thinking was that it’s a part of your learning and that’s why it’s built into a funding model for full-time students. They have the actual funding that they give you and then the other pocket of money that is for assistantships. If RAships are meant to be educational then they need to be regulated better. It worked in my benefit but it’s still not fair [that not everyone can become a research assistant]. (Full-time student with RAships)

The administrators also recommended creating a database to track RAships within the department:

I think it would be a good idea to do a database. We should have a list of our full-time students and who is doing work for us. Since I sign off on all contracts it should be easy for us to do a database. Sometimes it comes to my attention that people are working too many hours or people are getting not enough hours. So this job is about problems and problem solving, you don't necessary get people coming to me because they are happy. I would like to see things happening more online that's what I will push for. (Administrator)

One of the full-time students indicated the need for a feedback mechanism where students could anonymously report the quality of and satisfaction with their RAships. However, this student recognized that some students might be hesitant to utilize the feedback system due to potential consequences:

I wanted to add that I wish there would be something like you know rate my professor dot com. I almost wish there was something in the form of rate my research supervisor dot com, like some kind of network where you can provide feedback that is anonymous or you can get feedback to help you make an informed decision. (Full-time student with RAships)

This full-time student's idea about a feedback mechanism to some extent connects with one research supervisor's suggestion to make RAships more relevant and recognized. Similar to the feedback mechanism suggested by the student, the research supervisor believed that there should be recognition for faculty members who are role models in mentoring and training RAs:

We hear a lot about teaching awards and that's a part of that dossier . . . so [RAships seem] like a little bit of an unmined area . . . . My recommendation would be to have some sort of like certificate kind of program for RAs and then a place where faculty could contribute to the agenda for the program. And then maybe that's also a place where you have some sort of an opportunity for RAs to nominate faculty members as great research supervisors and mentors. Someone who did all those pieces that should be done as part of RAship, they were there to meet with me, they were there to review my work, to provide recommendations, they also set me up with other opportunities to maybe publish a piece that sort of things. (Research supervisor)

The recommendation to recognize those who engage in RAships as valuable research learning and mentoring venues was also echoed by one of the administrators. As indicated in the following suggestion, RAs should gain the same recognition and relevance as teaching assistants:

From our side [the office] maybe we could do a better job of attracting graduate students and making RAships more valued and recognized. We used to have different levels of RAship Higher Education Certificate program, three different levels. So we used to have that and then we stopped but I think that developing something like that would be great. We already have a TA certificate program but it is housed at the university level. And this initiative for RAs is at the Faculty level so for some reason we were not able to get our message out. As you know, with TA certificates the TAs have to attend a particular number of workshops to get basic or advanced certificates and there is also a competition for best TAs and

there is an award for them as well. So I guess if we could do that for RAs, it would be great. (Administrator)

Full-time students with RAships also called for higher accountability from research supervisors to provide research training and professional development opportunities for doctoral RAs:

It should be the expectation also that the institution has for the supervisors that they will provide that support, that it will be maybe more regulated, that there will be the process of reciprocity. It should be the expectation and not just a hope that the supervisor will provide support. (Full-time student with RAships)

One student, based on her overall experiences as an RA, emphasized the need for regulations that would safeguard the vulnerable positions of students and set high expectations for research supervisors to provide positive educational experiences for students:

Considering all of my research assistantships, half of them have been positive and half had been negative. If I look back at these experiences and think about flipping the coin on research assistantship experiences. It may come up as a positive experience or it may come up as a negative experience, so based on my history, there is a 50/50 chance. To me is it worth the risk for 50/50 odds? No, it's really not. We need to get research assistantships to the point where the experiences for all students will be like 90% positive. So we really need more regulations, and more protections for the student. I know that at other universities these positions are unionized so there is that support. I feel like the research supervisors need to be held a little bit more accountable in that process. The 50/50



chance that the experience will be positive means that it's not worth it to many students to engage in research assistantships. Obviously you can't guarantee 100% success or positive outcome, because there might be a lot of issues and extenuating circumstances including personality factors, but I feel that a 50/50 chance at a good research assistantship is not acceptable. (Full-time student with RAships)

This student's concern about a 50/50 chance of having a positive assistantship experience goes along with a statement an administrator made regarding research supervisors' skills to work with RAs. As evident from the following quotation, some faculty members may need to update their skills (e.g., mentoring skills) in order to provide positive RAship experiences to doctoral students:

Another thing would be educating faculty members on how to work with students. The role of a professor is very large and we are not taught a lot of the skills that we need to have; we may be very good at writing or reading but we may be terrible at teaching or good at teaching, we may be very good at mentoring students or we may not be. So there are lots of skills that faculty members need to have in order to assist students to be good research assistants in a way that will help them develop the skills to further themselves. And I don't mean as skills only the technical skills but the whole thing of seeing the bigger picture, more comprehensive view, and understanding that research is not a technique. (Administrator)

Two students indicated the need for a manual that would guide the organization of and expectations from RAships. However, one of these students was somewhat doubtful

if the researchers would actually consult such a manual: “Maybe there could be a manual of some sort of you know how to properly organize the research project but again I don’t think professors will take the time to read the manual anyways” (Full-time student with RAships).

Full-time students recommended making RAships about learning rather than about promoting professors’ research agendas and simply offering assistantships to those who have the skills to complete the tasks faster:

In terms of organization, I think researchers should clearly say what skills you can learn being part of a specific assistantship and students should state what skills they would like to develop. Not only what skills you already have and what the supervisors are looking for but it should be a learning process. (Full-time student with RAships)

Some of the full-time students expressed that it would be helpful if the actual duties would be clearly delineated in employment contracts:

With my own experience for most of the projects it was decided after the contract has been signed, maybe it would be better to do it up front so students know what to expect. I did have one situation where I applied for a position based on the posting and then when I actually went in for the interview it was way more than what they had specified. And I remember thinking there is no way it will fit in the 10 hours per week. This will take 30 hours per week and take away from everything that I need to do. (Full-time student with RAships)

In terms of working hours, the majority of full-time students with RA experiences believed that allocation of 10 hours per week for work should be reconsidered and made

more flexible. Participants expressed their dissatisfaction with such regulation at the doctoral level and believed that they should decide how many hours of assistantships to take on.

Two full-time students with RAships brought attention to the lack of a community for RAs. The students explained that there is a need for a space where they can engage in conversations with other RAs, share their experiences, ask questions, ask for advice, and learn from each other. It is evident from their responses that they would benefit from support and connection with other RAs. For example, one student explained,

I don't know if it's to do with the lack of a research assistant community or support, but I feel that it may have something to do with it in a sense that if I felt connected with kind of a team where we could brainstorm strategies together and work through it together then I might feel less pressure on myself and more collaborative. I felt almost this internal pressure because I'm on my own, because I'm doing this work independently . . . . If there would be space for research assistants to come together as a group and talk about concerns and issues they are having maybe then I could say oh, I know that person has great technical skills maybe they could show me or guide me with that. (Full-time student with RAships)

Full-time participants without RAship experiences listed fewer but similar recommendations as their colleagues with RAships. The four full-time students without RA experiences called for fair distribution of RAships in terms of making assistantships accessible to all students, which would require a transparent hiring process. Students expressed not being clear how to find out about available RA opportunities or which

research supervisors are interested in hiring RAs. They called for better advertisement of such opportunities:

One of the questions that I would have for the program, for the program administrators to consider, is how can we be more transparent with incoming students about what a research assistantship is and how you access them and know about them and then how you get on board. (Full-time student without RAships)

I think it would be good to have some well-publicized central repository where research assistantships are posted and well-advertised so that students interested in doing one would at least find out about them. There could be also some space crafted during the courses to let us know what is [an RAship], what's involved, and how you can find out about it, and why would you want to do one. (Full-time student without RAships)

Research supervisors also indicated a need to enhance accessibility to information about RAships. One research supervisor suggested creating a system that would allow (a) students to find out about research projects upon which researchers are working and potential RAship opportunities and (b) researchers to learn about students looking for RAships:

I don't think we do a good job in having one place where students can look and see what funding professors have and thus who may potentially look for someone. We just don't have a very good system to showcase what faculty are doing and showcase interests and skills that our graduate students have. I think of it as an online dating service, you know here is my profile, here is your profile and I'm

interested in finding someone and you are interested in finding someone, are we compatible? On many levels interests, skills, timing meaning maybe you only need someone two hours per week and the person can easily fit that in. (Research Supervisor)

Another student also made a similar comment regarding learning about RAships during the courses:

Perhaps RAships could be more openly discussed in the context of graduate courses; I learned a lot about other beneficial aspects of scholarly work in my classes (e.g., publishing, award applications, ethics, etc.) but not about the potential benefits of RAships. Also, to reiterate, I think they would be more enticing if they paid more. (Full-time student without RAships)

Full-time students without RA experience also suggested a repository of RAships or a space advertising available assistantships, which would allow students to access the opportunities in a timely manner. Students indicated,

[It would be useful] to know about them in time prior to making other commitments, and can there be an office or department at [the university] that keeps track of which ones are being done and which ones are available . . . .

Could there be a website that PhD students would know about that they can go and check what is available. Or even like Sakai which sends us an email every time a new posting is done within our Forum, maybe something similar that we are all in this Forum and if there is a new research assistantship being released it gets posted there. That's just thinking of what might have helped me. (Full-time student without RAships)

I wish that there was more transparency and even a place for us as PhD students to go to and find out about research assistantships. So it doesn't only happen through connections although that's legitimate. If I was a professor doing a research project I can see myself going to the students that I know and ask if they are willing to do it. So I would want to support them and I would know them well enough to know that they can do it. I don't have any problem with that approach but if there are any studies that are happening how can we know about them.

(Full-time student without RAships)

Similar to a comment made by one of the full-time students with RAships, one full-time student without RA experience suggested making RAship experience mandatory. This suggestion was mainly based on the fact that this student recognized the value of RAship experience and how much it could benefit his doctoral studies:

I thought about it just now but they may want to consider making RAships a requirement of the program. That at some point in your PhD you have to either work as an RA or show that you have done one in your master's. Because the skills that you learn as an RA and I'm speaking as a total outsider but I can see that those skills would be very valuable to me. Particularly in the case like mine where the master's didn't have the thesis and in my case that was years ago so even if I had a thesis, things have changed. When I did [my first PhD course], the first time I had to write up a response to a reading or something like that I pointed out to the professor that last time I wrote an essay you actually wrote the essay, it was hand written. Obviously things have changed in that respect but many other things have changed and research had to change as well. So even in terms of

updating your skills that would be really valuable. (Full-time student without RAships)

One of the administrators suggested more research on RAships to learn how to better support and educate the diversity of RAs:

From my experience more support is needed for research assistantships. In our Faculty, we have a diverse group of students; age wise, we have people from 22 to over 60. We have people from different cultures, international students, students native to this land, we have full-time and part-time students, people coming from different backgrounds, people with learning difficulties, people with physical disabilities. We have diverse students and when they become research assistants they probably experience different challenges and benefits. So how can we accommodate them, how can we support them? How can we support research assistants in an era of becoming a comprehensive university, in an era of huge international research projects? (Administrator)

During the interviews, a number of full-time students with RAships indicated that the terminology “research assistant” may be problematic in terms of contributing to researchers seeing doctoral students merely as assistants rather than partners:

And I wonder what research assistantship actually means because when you look at general office work, an assistant does all of your paper work or things that you can't be bothered to do. So I think that some professors just see you as being their assistant rather than being a partner, which I believed that's what the position is about that partnership. (Full-time student with RAships)

One student suggested that research partner or research collaborator would be more accurate terminology to use in terms of positioning both parties in collaboration:

Just recently there was a research assistantship posting where they were looking for a research assistant, a lead PhD student and they want that student to do the whole project so I don't understand how that person could be defined as assistant. So you carry the project through but you are an assistant . . . I don't know how that works. (Full-time student with RAships)

One of the research supervisors expressed a similar view regarding the term research assistant. According to the research supervisor, the term has a hierarchical connotation that is inappropriate for students at the doctoral level:

I don't really like the term research assistant because it means power relationship, which I don't like and at the PhD level in particular I dislike it. I like the term research collaborator, it would be a better term and it helps define the relationship. Research assistant can be okay when you are starting out if you are an undergraduate or master's student maybe but at the PhD level I like the term research collaborator. (Research supervisor)

Another research supervisor pointed out that with time some working relationships with her RAs shifted from RAship positions to research collaborator positions. In terms of terminology to be used in properly defining the work of doctoral RAs, one full-time student recalled her doctoral supervisor referring to her as a junior researcher. She suggested having different levels of RAships because terminology used is very important and affects the ways students position themselves:



There are assistantships where you do assist only but they are not all like that. So if we want people to treat us differently then we can't call ourselves assistants.

My doctoral supervisor has called me a junior researcher many times. And I think that term is probably more appropriate because we are in a doctoral program. We are being trained to become researchers so why are we being lumped in this assisting category. At some point this assistantship should probably progress into something else if we are expected to develop identities as researchers and see ourselves as such. (Full-time student with RAships)

This section illustrated that students with and without RAships had similar recommendations about how to improve access to RAships and enhance assistantships as research learning spaces. The majority of students called for a fair distribution of RAships in terms of making assistantships accessible to all students, which would require (a) a transparent hiring process, (b) an online advertisement of available assistantships to access potential opportunities in a timely manner, and (c) a database to track RAships within the department. The students also requested recognition and relevance for RAs that was similar to that granted to teaching assistants, as well as higher accountability from research supervisors to provide research training. The recommendations provided by research supervisors and administrators aligned with those of full-time doctoral students.

This section concludes the subcase of full-time students. In the next chapter, I present a subcase of part-time students.

## **CHAPTER SIX: SUBCASE OF RESEARCH ASSISTANTSHIPS FOR PART-TIME STUDENTS**

This chapter provides meaningful interpretation of the 12 final themes that emerged from the data analysis process. The interpretation is based on the experiences of five part-time students, two with and three without RAships. Doctoral students' experiences are complemented by responses from research supervisors, administrators, and relevant documents.

### **Part-Time Students' Self-Identification**

As already mentioned in the subcase involving the full-time students, I recognized that factors other than students' status, such as gender, race, age, and cultural background, could influence students' experiences with RAships. For that reason, I asked students to self-identify and to share what factors influenced their decisions to undertake part-time studies. The participants were asked to contribute only information they felt comfortable sharing.

Five part-time doctoral students participated in the study, two with and three without RAship experiences. All of the participants in this group were Caucasian women between 35–55 years of age (not all students reported age). The part-time students were all born in Canada; however, two of them reported European, Anglo-Saxon backgrounds; two Eastern-European backgrounds; and one student was not specific. None of the participants identified as a visible minority or claimed Aboriginal ancestry. In the next paragraphs, I provide a detailed overview for part-time students with RA experiences and then for part-time students without RA experiences. I describe the two groups separately for comparison purposes with full-time students as presented in Chapter Five.

The two part-time students with RAsip experiences were white females over 40 years old, born in Canada, with European, Anglo-Saxon backgrounds. Both students were married and one had children. One participant was in her 5<sup>th</sup> year of the doctoral program, and the other one had graduated within the past two years of data collection for this study (Fall 2013).

The part-time students without RAsips were three White females born in Canada. All three of them were married and two had children. One participant was in her third year of the program (during her residency while interviewed), one in the fourth year, and one in the sixth year.

### **Reasons for Studying Part-Time**

The main reason for the two doctoral students with RAsip experiences to undertake part-time studies was their full-time employment. Both students enjoyed their work and were not in positions to resign from the financial benefits that full-time employment delivered, including medical benefits for their families:

I have two children to put through school and I can't give up four years of salary that's huge. I also have not been teaching that long so I wasn't even at the top of my salary so it's hugely financial. And not only financial but the benefits, not having benefits for my family, there are so many different things. And even if I was teaching courses at the university they don't pay well enough for me to leave my job. I was lucky to afford the tuition. So part-time studies is the way to go and most of my degrees I have done part time. (Part-time student with RAsips)

I was working full-time and I wouldn't quit my job. I knew I wanted to do the PhD but I also knew that there is no difference if I do it full time or part time. I

loved my job . . . and I knew I could do it [PhD] with keeping my job at least up until my doctoral residency. (Part-time student with RAships)

As evident from these participants' responses, they were both committed to undertaking doctoral studies while keeping their full-time jobs. It is interesting to note that one student claimed that the only difference between full-time studies and part-time studies was funding, which was designated for full-time students only:

It's kind of hard to describe this program because even though you define it as part time, the program is exactly the same whether you are part time or full time. It's only a monetary difference in terms of what the university is willing to give you in terms of funding. If you are part time not much but the program is exactly the same whether you are part time or full time. (Part-time student with RAships)

Doctoral students without RAships identified their full-time employment as a main reason for undertaking part-time studies. Becoming part-time students allowed them the flexibility to work full time and engage in doctoral studies. As one student explained, "There are not that many programs with such flexibility" to study full time or part time. For these students, full-time careers provided the income necessary to sustain their family lives; therefore undertaking full-time studies was not an option any of the part-time students even considered. One of the participants added that undertaking a doctoral program was meant to enhance her current career:

I have a full-time position and I see that completing my graduate study degree as an opportunity to make me a better researcher. Whereas many graduate students aspire to teach at the university, that is not one of my primary goals. (Part-time student without RAships)

Two part-time students also indicated family situation was a factor. In both cases, participants were looking for doctoral programs that would not take them away physically from their family lives. As the students explained, the location as well as the time required to be on campus were factors they kept in mind when selecting where to study. One student reported,

Doing a PhD full time was not an option for me for two reasons: the family and the full- time career. So PhD is really my third priority. First it's family, work, and then PhD, although work and the PhD flip from time to time. Sometimes the PhD becomes more important than work but essentially the income from the job was important to sustain the family life at home. So switching to full-time studies wasn't an option that I was prepared to consider at all. When I was looking for PhD programs, I essentially limited myself to applying for programs that offered a part-time option. (Part-time student without RAships)

As evident from the responses from all five doctoral students, their full-time employment was a number one factor that influenced their decisions to undertake part-time studies. Full-time employment provided financial benefits to support themselves and their families, therefore, they did not consider full-time studies.

### **Access to Research Assistantships**

Two part-time students had multiple RAship experiences. Although both students secured assistantships through informal processes, one of them confirmed familiarity with the formal recruitment process for RAs. Both part-time students attributed securing RAship opportunities to being proactive, connecting with professors, and letting them know about their availability to work as RAs. The responses from the doctoral part-time

students with RAships corresponded to information reported by the research supervisors who indicated finding RAs mainly through personal contacts or by recommendations rather than a formal recruitment process. As one research supervisor pointed out, she would prefer knowing the quality of students' work prior to hiring them as RAs:

Although coursework does not always translate into quality of teaching assistant or research assistant work, which I did find out in a hard way. I do like to know them but I did hire in the past research assistants I didn't know. And what I do look for is a recommendation from somebody else who has worked with them. If there is no recommendation then I usually will put them on a smaller project first so that I can see firsthand what they can do.

One student indicated that one of her RAship relationships began during her master's program and continued throughout her doctoral studies:

I worked as an RA for that professor in my MEd and then this relationship continued during my doctoral studies. My understanding is that the department has somebody who collects CVs for people who want RA work and then when the professor is looking for someone they can review the CVs. That's not the way I got any of my jobs but I understand that's the way it works. (Part-time student with RAships)

Both part-time students raised the issue of poor communication and advertisement of available RA positions. According to the students, their part-time status limited their access to information about assistantships and thus their RAship opportunities:

As a part-time student I never got any notifications about RAships. If there were any, we didn't hear about them. There is just no chance to find out about these

opportunities if you are not on campus . . . . There were no notifications, there were no spaces to say you are interested; I can't email every professor and say I want to be an RA. So the communication is very bad, there is just no information available to you. (Part-time student with RAships)

Had I left it alone with just my status and not being proactive I would have nothing, nothing would have happened. Even during my residency I didn't get a single TA or RA position even though at that point I was better qualified than anybody. (Part-time student with RAships)

Research supervisors also reported a lack of electronic accessibility to information about RAships in general. As reported by one researcher, there is a lack of electronic information about what RA positions are available and who is interested in RA positions. In terms of hiring RAs, although regulations indicate that the priority in hiring assistants should go to full-time students, the majority of research supervisors indicated that they did not pay attention to students' status when looking for RAs. The main factors researchers considered for recruitment were students' availability during a specific timeframe, interest in the research topic, and skills required to complete tasks. According to individual preferences, some factors were more important than others for each research supervisor:

I'm really interested in does the student have the time to devote themselves to the work that I have in mind and the timeframe I have in mind. And I know that full-time students can be busy or busier than part-time students who frequently have full-time jobs. Really it is whether they can collaborate with me within the timeframe that is important to me. (Research supervisor)

I think the number one factor, regardless if they are full time or part time, is a common interest. I want the experience to be of an intrinsic interest to them not just an extra job, task, or something to put on their CV. I want it truly to benefit them and in both cases [with my research assistants] that has been the situation. The research they were assisting with and paid to do so has been a personal interest but also their area of expertise and they have been able to use the knowledge and the experience in their own work. So that's important to me and I think to them and it gets them excited about the work too. It's a win-win situation really. This is more important to me than their research skills. I think that the skills can be taught but if they don't have that connectedness to the topic I don't think they would derive as much benefits from it. (Research supervisor)

Two students advocated for equal access to RAships for part-time and full-time students. As evident in the following quotation, the part-time student argued that regardless of any student's status, everyone should have the opportunity to work as an RA during doctoral studies:

I think everyone deserves a chance at least once to be an RA. I mean I wouldn't like to see the situation where everyone is handcuffed in terms of . . . I don't think you should not be hired or re-hired. I think we have to be reasonable here but every single person who wants that opportunity should be allowed to have it. Now, if someone who is working full time and studying full time it can be hard to take on another task but there are moments when you can. (Part-time student with RAships)



As explained by one of the administrators, “part-time students can be also hired if full-time students are not available. The idea is to support the full-time students who are not working and getting some additional income to support their studies and life.” Recognizing that part-time students tend to have full-time employment, they are not considered a first choice for financial support through assistantships.

One part-time student expressed her disappointment regarding her residency period, which did not offer her any educational opportunities. She explained that the residency required her to quit her job and become a full-time student for two consecutive terms, but there were no opportunities for her during that time to engage in any assistantships. As clarified in Chapter Four, part-time students need to fulfil their residency requirements during the two doctoral seminars and two other consecutive terms. It is suggested that part-time students undertake two consecutive terms of residency after they have defended their comprehensive examination and dissertation proposal (program document, 2013). The residency period requires students to be on campus, which allows them to meet and work with researchers as well as attend various functions and presentations at the university to help them with their research. Although this student worked as an RA during her doctoral studies, the following quote illustrates her disappointment with the residency period:

When I was quasi full time during the residency there were no opportunities for me. After all this nonsense was over I went back to part-time status . . . . So technically during my residency I was a full-time student but I still didn’t get it [assistantships] because everyone knew that after that I’m going back to part-time status. So even during the residency you are not really full-time status is just

paper work and it's a disgrace. It's a disgrace . . . . The program is the same for part-time and full-time students, there is no difference whatsoever so why all the opportunities go only to full-time students. It's not fair, it's not right, and it's something that needs to change. (Part-time student with RAships)

Part-time students without RAship experience echoed voices of those with RAships in terms of poor advertisement of RA positions. Two of the students emphasized feeling disconnected from the university's research community and lacking practical research experience. When talking about her own dissertation research, one student admitted feeling "scared, very overwhelmed about that" (Part-time student without RAships). One of the three part-time students without RAships experienced a lack of RAship opportunities during her residency. She felt that she had missed out on a valuable experience:

[RAships are] definitely a piece that I missed out on. And again, when I was here this summer doing residency there was no RAship available. I really struggled and I do think it would have benefited me. I think it would expose me to other pieces of the university culture and the academy. I didn't have that opportunity and I think it's unfortunate. (Part-time student without RAships)

Administrators indicated that the residency period is meant to offer doctoral students "the opportunity to apply the theory to practice, opportunities to help them in their own research, and opportunities to work more closely with faculty members, especially to understand what it is like to be a faculty member" (Administrator). However, based on the part-time students' responses, it seems that not all students benefited from temporary full-time status during their residency periods.

### **Reasons for (Not) Becoming Research Assistants**

Both part-time students who worked as RAs agreed that RAships provided educational spaces to acquire knowledge about research. In fact, their main motivation to become RAs was learning research through hands-on experiences. One student identified learning about qualitative and quantitative research methods as a main reason to engage in RAships:

In the first place it was because I didn't know anything about qualitative or quantitative research. I had a little bit of knowledge from my undergrad and my previous work but I didn't know much about educational research. I knew that it's going to be a big part of my life . . . . I knew that I will need to learn a lot about research. So that's what motivated me, I wanted to learn both qualitative and quantitative research. In fact, during our [RAship] meetings we would go off the record, especially when I was in the research methods course because even though I have a pretty good head for numbers and stats there were elements of quantitative research that were not clear to me. (Part-time student with RAships)

This statement aligns with a statement provided by one of the administrators that RAships provide space for "skill training, understanding the research process, understanding how much is involved in research which is always very surprising to people. Also, having the opportunity to work closely with a professor it's usually something that students appreciate." Working with researchers and connecting with other students were in fact identified as other reasons for engaging in RAships. As reported by one of the students, making connections with supervisors and other team members enriched the RAship experience: "And also dealing with PhD colleagues, just having a

chance to be mentored by them and that in itself is a wonderful experience. So not only dealing with my own advisor but dealing with others and making connections” (Part-time student with RAships).

On a similar note, the other part-time student reported engaging in RAships to feel more connected with her colleagues and the learning community within the department. She explained that she needed that connection as a part-time student since her visits on campus were not regular. One of the administrators also observed that RAships allow students to feel connected to a research community: “I think that it [engagement in RAships] helps PhD students to become a part of the research community because through that practice they get comfortable with the setting and tasks, they start feeling that they belong to this community” (Administrator).

Two part-time students without RA experiences were in unique positions where their careers and the work they were doing aligned closely with their doctoral studies. One of the part-time students reported having the opportunity to work on different research projects that often resulted in conference presentations and publications. As she explained, she was not actively seeking RAships due to these great opportunities at her workplace:

I already contribute to research projects and these projects are connected to my doctoral work. So I have a fantastic alignment between the projects I take on at work that add and develop research skills for me as well as conferences and publications that are much more connected to the PhD work I’m doing than any research assistantships I imagine offering . . . . So perhaps I’m getting all the

benefits at work that one may get through research assistantships. (Part-time student without RAships)

In further discussions, the student indicated that if an RAship closely related to her research interest would become available she would consider the opportunity. She also recognized that as much as becoming an RA could be beneficial it could also take away time from her family and her doctoral studies. She identified several criteria an RA position would have to meet in order for her to consider it:

There are downsides too that I see as well. It could potentially take away from the actual research I'm doing for the PhD. So one of the considerations I would have for sure, if I would consider an RAship, would be the flexibility that it would provide in terms of when the work was to be done. That would be number one. The second consideration I would have applying for or taking on an RAship would be how connected it is to my own research interests and how I can take what I'm learning during the RAship and use that to complement or build on in my PhD. So if there is not a good alignment between those two things or if the RAship wouldn't provide me with the skills that I felt I needed to learn that would help with the PhD it would not be an option for me. I wouldn't do it for the money or developing skills that aren't connected in some way. (Part-time student without RAships)

For this participant, money was not an incentive (full-time employment provided sufficient income for her family) and the value of RAships was all about gaining research skills and knowledge that would contribute to her progress and success in her doctoral studies.

The other part-time student whose workplace also allowed her to gain research experience that other students may hope to gain through RAship experience described a similar situation:

I do read the emails that contain notices about available assistantships . . . and I try to find out what the project might be about that does interest me but I'm not able to take on these positions because I do live so far away . . . . I can say though that I have had the opportunity for more than 20 years now to participate in other people's research so in terms of working with a group of people on a research project I do have quite a bit of that experience . . . . As I have said earlier I had the opportunity to do different kinds of research within my current position so I think that I have already experienced what I would have gained by being an RA. (Part-time student without RAships)

This part-time student further explained that the topic of the project would not have to be applicable to her doctoral work but an RAship would have to offer flexible hours that fit her schedule for her to get involved:

I would have to consider how much flexibility is there in terms of time and when it can be done. Can it be done on my time during the evenings or it would have to be done during particular hours during the day. That would be number one, flexible hours that fit with my life. (Part-time student without RAships)

One part-time student with no RA experience recalled an RA position that caught her attention as it was very closely connected to her doctoral research. After inquiring about the RA's role on the project and tasks to complete, she decided not to proceed with the assistantship. Considering this opportunity and all her other duties, she realized that

this experience could not deliver enough benefits to justify the time commitment it would require:

The actual work they were asking to be done is the most detested work that everybody has to put together. So collecting documents and formatting them . . . work that requires many hours and gets very little respect. So while there was this opportunity that came up there was no way that I would do this type of work for whatever pay. Because I know how much time that takes and I don't know how it would add any skill whatsoever or any benefit to my work. When I think back why I didn't take that position I don't want to say that it was beneath me but perhaps it was in terms of skills. It would just not add to the work I was doing in any way so the only thing it would give me is the extra income. And it would have taken a lot of my time, which would take away from my own PhD studies. So there is a cost-benefit analysis and almost every decision I make in terms of what projects I take on, I have to weigh things. In any project there is a quick analysis that I have to do in terms of what is it going to give me in terms of additional skills or new knowledge, new connections, networking . . . it could be anything. And then what it's going to cost me in terms of time. So that is the only research assistantship that I actually saw advertised. (Part-time student without RAships)

Two of the part-time students with no RAships identified their distant locations from the campus as a factor limiting their involvement in RAships. They also identified location as a factor affecting their ability to attend information sessions and workshops about RAships. This in turn resulted in their unawareness about how to access RAships

or how RAships were managed and distributed. In one case, the student reported contacting a research supervisor looking for an RA to indicate her interest in the position, which called for editing and formatting manuscripts. She believed that the tasks could be completed remotely; however, the research supervisor preferred to hire someone who could attend regular meetings on campus:

There was one opportunity that came up last Fall that looked to me that it could have been done by distance, that things could have been electronically sent to me. I inquired about that and was told that it needed to be face to face done, which I didn't explore any further. But it didn't make sense to me given what the task was in terms of the reviewing of the documents. (Part-time student without RAships)

As reported by one of the administrators, the distant location of many part-time students might limit their awareness of what RAship opportunities are available. However, she also pointed out that some RA positions may involve tasks that could be accomplished from home with virtual meetings:

I think that the idea of being a full-time or a part-time student is very important because part-time students are often distant from the university. Not being around they might miss hearing about or taking on different research assistant opportunities, but some might say that they would like to do some research assistant work from home. For example, literature review can be conducted from home. There are also virtual ways of meeting, Skype and email. (Administrator)

The main motivation to become RAs for the two students with assistantships was learning research through hands-on experiences. Other reasons for engaging in the assistantships that these students identified included working with researchers, being



mentored, and connecting with other students. The students without RAships identified their locations as a factor limiting their involvement in assistantships. They also were aware that working as RAs could take them away from their families and doctoral studies. Two students explained that their work provided them with similar opportunities that they might have gained through RAships and they had therefore not sought RAships.

### **Engagement in Research Assistantships**

During their doctoral program, two part-time students who worked as RAs experienced more than one RAship. The first part-time student engaged in two shorter experiences involving separate one-term contracts. Both contracts were with the same research supervisors and did not involve other team members. The second part-time student had three assistantships for extended periods of time with two different supervisors. As she explained, the longer assistantships allowed her to fully immerse in the projects: “Everything from the very beginning, background of developing a SSHRC application and putting together a conference proposal right to the very end of actually writing a paper” (Part-time student with RAships).

The part-time student with three RAships clarified that her first RAship was an extension of a relationship that developed during her master’s degree and then carried over into her PhD studies. Her other two assistantships began during her doctoral studies and carried over until the end of her PhD program. Two RAships involved work with the supervisor only whereas the other project also included another doctoral RA. Two of her assistantships were closely connected to her research interests and one was not. Although one of the projects was on a topic that was outside her research interests, the student

reported benefiting from the experience significantly in terms of mentoring relationships and learning about the research process:

I would have to say that that's one of the most important relationships in terms of me understanding research. That's where I really learned a lot about it. It's interesting because I was an RA in an area and a topic that really wasn't my interest. I did it to learn the research process. (Part-time student with RAships)

The above quotation provides evidence that engagement in RAships where the topic is not a perfect fit with a doctoral student's research interests may also become a valuable learning experience. However, it was also evident that some research supervisors prefer hiring students whose research interests match the particular project.

### **Benefits of Working as Research Assistants**

Overall, both part-time students with RAship experiences expressed benefiting from the assistantships even though they also encountered some challenges. One of the participants stated that although she was not involved in the project for extended periods of time, all the tasks and activities influenced her development as a researcher. She appreciated the opportunity to learn and contribute her existing skills to the project. She also felt that contributing her existing statistical skills allowed her to work on enhancing her communication skills:

[My research supervisor] still has a greater knowledge than me in my field of study . . . . She is still my superior in many ways but I see SPSS as a tool and it's just like teaching somebody how to use the computer, the stuff you put in they know you just have to teach them how to put it in. So I'm helping her bridge those gaps. And it's great for me too because I'm a numbers person but I think some

people that are really numbers people are not necessarily people's people. They may be very good at stats but then they can't explain it. So what I had to do is explain everything in real language. That's one of my goals is to teach the stats course where people actually enjoy it. (Part-time student with RAships)

On that note, one of the research supervisors expressed that collaborating and encouraging students' contributions to projects are the main ingredients for learning to occur:

If students have learned anything in their relationship with me it was because of what they brought and what they contributed [to RAships] and thus what they learned as part of the process. I'm not going to claim that I brought a preconceived program to them that they responded to and learned from. I think that the collaboration led to any learning that might have occurred. (Research supervisor)

Another research supervisor admired skills that some of the RAs brought to her projects. She recognized that she had learned from RAs and regularly relied upon their expertise:

Both of my RAs have the expertise in areas that I absolutely admire so the one that I have for some time now has the expertise in technology. So I just default to her and ask if it's going to work, can you find me an app for that so you the expert and you can guide this part. So I'm relying on her to tell us what to do here. The other RA has the experience in language acquisition, I learned from her about differences . . . so how I benefited is through getting different perspectives that they bring. (Research supervisor)

Both part-time students expressed that their RAships contributed to the development of their identities as researchers. One student mentioned that the assistantship she was working on was “very interesting because I’m feeling more of a research partner in it and really helping to get into the depth of the research” (Part-time student with RAships). The other part-time student began to feel like a researcher rather than an assistant when she became an RA for a project that closely connected to her research interests. This part-time student also accredited her researcher development to participation in advanced tasks and activities such as crafting a grant application, collecting data, and co-writing a research paper. She also identified a multi-day retreat with well-known scholars as a unique experience that shaped her identity as a researcher:

And it wasn’t that I was just there. I was there presenting and contributing my research. So it was an RAship but I wasn’t there as an RA, I was there as equally contributing scholar although it didn’t feel I was an equal member but I was treated as an equal immersed in all the discussions. So it had a huge impact, especially that there was the intimidation factor shall we say. Because the names that were there, they are as big as it gets. (Part-time student with RAships)

One of the students described RAships as paid experiences to learn and grow. She emphasized that her experiences were invaluable and she gladly invested more time than the hours for which she was paid so she could maximize her learning within assistantships. It is important to notice that the part-time student perceived herself to be in a financial situation that allowed her to volunteer the extra hours:

Sometimes I just make sure that the job gets done well and I’m learning as I go. I see RAship positions as being paid to learn. I think it’s a wonderful opportunity

because you get a chance to be exposed to real research with all the little components and problems that come with it. I think it's excellent and personally I would do it for free because I do have a fairly decent income. So for me RAships provide the opportunity to learn. (Part-time student with RAships)

Both part-time students claimed that RA experiences informed them in terms of how to engage in RAships in ethical ways and what kinds of supervisors they would like to become. As evident from the following quotation, RAship experiences provide students with lessons about what aspects they would be willing to implement in their own practice:

I mean I can't say enough about how important being an RA has been to my development and my sense of self of who I want to be as a supervisor of RAs. So it's twofold because I was an RA I know what I want to do and what I don't want to do. And I think that the sense of ethics that I have is also partially because I was involved in two situations where my RAships were very ethical from start to finish. (Part-time student with RAships)

The following quotation showcases how one of the students, looking back at her RAships, realized they went above and beyond her expectations. She indicated that RAship experiences allowed her to prosper as a future scholar:

Looking back I have to say that they went above and beyond but at the time when I first started . . . hard to say. In my second RAship I had a better sense of what I was doing so in that case again the expectations not only have been met but went above and beyond. I think I was very lucky in that regard because I was able to prosper in many ways. My RAships were never narrow; both scholars wanted me

fully immersed in the whole system of learning about research. I was fully immersed in all aspects of the research process. (Part-time student with RAships)

One of the research supervisors also brought attention to the potential of RAships to contribute to the development of doctoral students:

They have so much to gain; it's not about getting a pay cheque to be a research assistant. They have so much to gain in their development that I think we lose sight of that sometimes. I think we lose sight of the fact that we were once them and that the smallest experience is so meaningful to them. (Research supervisor)

As indicated in the above quotation, students have much to gain working as RAs and sometimes researchers forget that these kinds of educational experiences had contributed to their own development as scholars. In fact, two researchers voiced that engagement in RAships helped students when they were looking for jobs. One of the administrators expressed a similar view:

I think it would be like for all students that you are offering them money and opportunities to develop research skills. It's good for the university and it's good for the program if our students have developed the kinds of skills that will help them with future employment. Even though the purpose of a doctorate is not employment directly, we would want students to have the kinds of skills that will allow them to be employable. We also hope that these skills will help them in their studies. (Administrator)

As illustrated in this section, the two part-time doctoral students benefited from their RAship experiences. The students recognized that engagement in various tasks and activities within assistantships contributed to their development as researchers. Both

students also reported that RA experiences informed them about ways to engage ethically as research supervisors and the kinds of supervisors they would like to become.

### **Challenges Within Research Assistantships**

The two part-time students with experience working as RAs identified different challenges within RAships. One student spoke about finding it challenging to communicate with the research supervisor mainly via email rather than in person. Although the contact with the supervisor was maintained throughout the RAships and the assignments were well explained to move the project forward, she wished for meetings in person to discuss research in depth and have a chance to ask ad-hoc questions. Some of her comments suggest that she did not feel comfortable to openly voice this concern to her research supervisor:

The first [RAship] was . . . many emails back and forth, which is fine but I would prefer talking to the person and really getting into the research, asking questions, and getting into the depth of it. And that's what I'm doing now [in a second RAship]. (Part-time student with RAships)

Another challenge voiced by one participant was related to uncertainty of her boundaries as an RA and the level of contribution she should make to the project. The doctoral student found it challenging to regulate herself in terms of not overstepping the role of RA and doing too much. Also in this case, there seems to be the issue of not communicating a concern to the research supervisor:

What I'm trying to do right now is to figure out where the line is between contributing and over contributing like how much analysis does she want me to do. For example, does she want me to draw the conclusions because it's clear in

some cases that there are clear conclusions but I don't think she can see them but I can see them? I'm trying to find the boundary between being an assistant and then overstepping my boundary and acting as a researcher. I mean I'm a researcher but I'm just an assistant researcher. (Part-time student with RAships)

Further conversation with the part-time student about her concern not to overstep the boundaries of an RA position seemed to be connected to the student's unawareness about what an RA's role may actually encompass.

One of the part-time students identified her confidence as a challenge. She shared her initial fears and struggles to communicate with researchers and to undertake new research tasks. Nevertheless, committed to overcome her intimidation, she realized that some of the activities were not as challenging as they first appeared:

To a certain degree the biggest challenge would be me . . . . For instance, I found myself being afraid to ask questions or being afraid to knock at the professor's door that I didn't know but I wanted to know. And I know that at some point you just have to do it and I did but in some cases I struggled. I have to say that the biggest challenge would have been me because even just summoning up the courage to do the interviews by myself . . . so overcoming fear and intimidation.

So doing things like interviewing is not that bad and once you have done it then it kind of becomes exciting and you start to think about ways to do more of it. (Part-time student with RAships)

One of the research supervisors pointed out the importance of RAships as venues that promote students' feelings of belonging to a scholarly community. The research



supervisor also emphasized that providing students with positive RAship experiences might ameliorate their initial intimidation within the program:

I also think that [an RAship] helps PhD students to become a part of the research community because through that practice they get comfortable with the setting and tasks, they start feeling that they belong to this community. This is very important because some of the students at the very beginning can be scared. They come with a lot of knowledge but from different areas of life. And some students finished their master's many years ago and now they come to a PhD program to do research that they didn't do before. They might be scared but if these research assistantship experiences are positive experiences, it might help. It allows them to grow and develop as an academic, a researcher, someone who cares about teaching and learning. (Research supervisor)

On a similar note, one student who worked as an RA experienced a lack of a learning community, which also influenced her access to different educational opportunities, including RAships:

I don't really have a strong learning community and that's something that I really need. When I first started they had some kind of writers' workshops that I was interested in and I wish they had still done that because I could work around that and even be exposed to colleagues that are at the same level as me . . . but I don't have a learning community. And that not being around other people connects to not finding out about different opportunities. So it's a big challenge that way.

(Part-time student with RAships)

Two of the students (one with and one without assistantships) reported access to RAships for part-time students during their residency as a concern. As explained in the earlier section, the students expressed their disappointment regarding a lack of assistantship opportunities during their residency periods.

### **Relationships With Research Supervisors**

Both part-time students with RAships reported having positive relationships with their research supervisors. As stated by the students, mentorship provided by the research supervisors allowed them to grow as future scholars and researchers. One participant explained that the supervisor not only contributed to her development as a researcher but also created a learning environment that allowed her to feel like a colleague and a collaborator: “I developed my identity as a researcher, I would define myself as a researcher and I see this professor and I as colleagues that work together meanwhile I started as an RA” (Part-time student with RAships).

One of the research supervisors expressed her enthusiasm about working with doctoral RAs: “I love working with doctoral and master’s students as part of the research. It’s the mentoring and collaborative learning. Particularly we in the Education field, we are very much into mentorship. That’s what we do we teach.” Another research supervisor also emphasized the importance of mentorship: “For me it’s important to have not only the worker bee but it is a part of my job to mentor. And that’s the educational component and the training.” As evident, both researchers viewed RAships as opportunities for mentoring and collaborative learning.

The other part-time student referred to her relationship with one of the research supervisors as co-mentoring. The participant appreciated the relationship with her

supervisor because the dynamics involved co-mentoring and working together with a common goal in mind: “Since my knowledge of statistics is greater and more recent than hers I’m able to contribute versus just doing a task . . . . There is lots of talking back and forth and asking questions and then me making suggestions” (Part-time student with RAships). One of the research supervisors confirmed the importance of co-learning and co-mentoring when working with doctoral RAs:

I have to say that my experiences with doctoral students they become colleagues as result of the work we do together. The other thing is that the students should understand the way they contribute to my professional development. I really do see it as a reciprocal relationship. (Research supervisor)

The following quotation illustrates the idea of working together with a common goal to make a project successful. As the research supervisor expressed, the RA was not working for her but for the project:

I feel that I have responsibility as a research supervisor to make sure that a research assistant is comfortable with the tasks and the deadlines for their completion. And there is this ongoing monitoring and support . . . . She also knows that she is not working for me, she is working for the project. (Research supervisor)

One part-time student expressed appreciation for having an opportunity to publish with the research supervisor and have something tangible as a result of her engagement in the RAship. She expressed satisfaction of seeing many months of intense research work manifest in a publication: “It was a very big project; we ended up publishing together . . . . It’s nice to see your hard work come together” (Part-time student with RAships).

This perspective aligns with a statement one of the research supervisors made regarding publishing with RAs: “I think that research assistantships relationship should be quantifiable for a student and able to be reproduced for example on their CV as a real contribution as opposed to a support role.” Another research supervisor also pointed out the importance of providing publication opportunities for her students: “I like to work with graduate students for the obvious reasons like collecting data, getting as much data as I can but I always have co-published with them . . . so there is mentoring that happens.” Both researchers believed that it is important for them to invest time in students’ professional development and engage them in written dialogue with the research community.

Although the other part-time student did not have an opportunity to publish or present at conferences with her research supervisor (due to a shorter duration of her RA contracts), she felt involved in the project and appreciated for her work. The student clarified that it would be quite naïve to expect becoming a co-author for a small contribution to the project:

Just because you did a small amount of work doesn’t mean you get to be on the paper. I think it’s first of all up to the researcher and you have to do a lot of work to get your name on a piece of paper. Just because you interpreted some data doesn’t mean that you get your name down there because the amount of work that went into putting the survey together, coming up with the questions, figuring things out, talking to the people, getting ethics approval and doing all that work that’s behind it and I just do a tiny little component . . . it doesn’t make me a co-

author. I think it is very naïve of people to think that they should have their name on the paper. (Part-time student with RAships)

As evident from the two part-time students' accounts, they both had positive relationships with their research supervisors. As these students reported, the mentoring relationships they had established with their research supervisors allowed them to grow as future researchers.

### **Educational and Ethical Research Assistantships**

As evident from Chapter Four, several documents (internal and external) encourage educational and ethical RAships. It was my intention to understand how participants understood the notion of ethical and educational RAships and whether doctoral student RAs considered their assistantships to be ethical and educational.

Both participants who worked as RAs classified their RAships as educational and ethical. They learned research, experienced mentorship, and felt recognized for their contributions. When asked what educational RAships meant, one of the part-time students voiced that educational RAships are about learning research by doing and participating in research:

Educational would be learning, being exposed to new areas of research, being exposed to different ways of doing research, and all the methods involved in doing qualitative and quantitative research. I think it's very important to actually listen to it, see it, and watch it. But also participate in research. (Part-time student with RAships)

The other part-time student viewed ethical and educational aspects as being intertwined in quality assistantships. As pointed out by the student, researchers are

responsible for focusing on and contributing to RAs' professional development as future scholars:

I think it is important ethically to make an RAship as educational as you possibly can. It should not be a situation where somebody is just paid for a task but they are paid for a task which will contribute to their development and growth. I think that being a professor is a great position but it also carries certain responsibilities, which I don't necessarily always feel are fulfilled or at least not the way they should be. There is an ethical obligation if you are going to take big bucks and have a nice secure tenured job then you better make sure that you are encouraging the development of the next generation of scholars and you better make that part of your identity. This is my humble opinion. So I see it as educational and ethical intertwined. (Part-time student with RAships)

According to one of the research supervisors, ethical conduct is a prerequisite for an educational RAship experience. As indicated in the following statements, all team members involved in a project need to have clear understandings of their roles and responsibilities from the outset of their collaboration:

First and foremost the research assistantship experience has to be ethical. I mean that is step one, if it's not then it really doesn't matter what happens beyond that. So the understanding of the responsibilities of the doctoral student and the research supervisor, responsibilities that both have to the institution and ultimately to the field that they are committing to in terms of everything from fraudulent data analysis to giving proper credit for work completed by a doctoral

student and sharing of the outcomes, all that has to be upfront. So that kind of relationship needs to be established. (Research supervisor)

One administrator suggested that ideal educational RAships would allow researchers to engage students from the commencement of the study until the publication phase. Furthermore, this learning could be maximized by hiring multiple RAs who could engage in conversations and learn from each other. However, all these possibilities are highly dependent on available funding and, as recognized by the administrator, “research dollars are hard to get”:

I think the best-case scenario is if you were doing research and you can hire someone to assist you and they can see the whole process and where they fit in that process. They can see what opportunities there are for research, they can see what is involved in research, they can see the bigger picture from the start to finish. I think it would be very educational if you could work as a team, maybe with other students. That would be useful because then you have the opportunity to have conversations. If you can see things happening from the beginning stage to the publication stage that would be very useful. (Administrator)

The administrator’s suggestion for ideal educational RAships echoes a statement from one research supervisor:

Ideally, to be involved in a more of an educational experience I would need to get them involved earlier on in the process of doing research . . . . I think it could be different if the student would come in right at the beginning of the project where they would be informed and available to work on it for the next three years. That would be a very different experience than just looking for help from September to

December. And therefore the work that they do is truncated and thus educational experience gets truncated and reduced. (Research supervisor)

One administrator explained that educational and ethical RAships depend on “who you are working with . . . . It depends on a faculty member and the rules of the university and how well they maintain systems of accountability is tricky.”

As evident from this section, the two part-time students with RAships considered their experiences as educational and ethical. Both students acquired research knowledge, experienced mentorship, and felt recognized for their work.

### **Impact of Part-Time Status (and Other Factors) on Research Assistantships**

I asked the part-time students if and how their part-time status and any other factors influenced their experiences with RAships. As reported above, one of the students strongly believed that there was not much difference between full-time and part-time studies, except that funding support and “preferential treatment” was provided to full-time students. The student believed that priority was given to full-time students for RAships and other opportunities:

I find that it is typical kind of issue when you work as RA. If you are a full-time student on campus it's all fine and well. You get sort of priority in being dealt with but if you are a part time they [professors and staff] deal with you when they deal with you. You are not a priority, you are not even a topic of interest. (Part-time student with RAships)

The student further voiced that the unfair treatment of part-time students led her to feel isolated and excluded from opportunities and benefits granted to full-time



students. The repetition of the phrase “you don’t count” seemed to emphasize this student’s feelings of frustration for being isolated and treated as second class:

If you are part-time you don’t count. That’s just the way it is . . . even if you are doing your doctoral residency, which technically is only 8 months and quite frankly it was a complete waste of time for me. I don’t know why I had to do it but I had to. When you are part time, at least in my experience being a part-time student, you don’t count, you don’t get emails answered, you don’t get contracts drafted, you don’t get advice on how to do things, you don’t get RAships unless you have established relationships, you are completely left out 100% in every way from the relationships that you actually need to build if you want to be a scholar. If you are a part-time student it sucks. You are completely isolated, you are on your own and even if you have an advisor it doesn’t matter because your advisor will deal with a full-time student before they will deal with you. So you don’t count in terms of getting grants and funding, you don’t count in terms of relationships that you can build with professors, you don’t count in terms of being addressed and answered by your advisor the same amount of time and you just don’t count. (Part-time student with RAships)

The other part-time student also felt isolated as a part-time student and felt unable to take advantage of some opportunities because of her rare presence on campus. As the student phrased it, “proximity and flexibility in timing” are the two factors that made her feel disconnected from the program and limited her RAship opportunities:

As a part-time student I’m quite isolated. I tried to get my cohort to meet on a regular basis but that fell apart. It’s nice to talk to my colleagues and I maybe talk

to them once a year and talk about PhD stuff because you don't get to have that depth of the conversation with many. So I find myself isolated and I wish that would be not the case. An example is they had some research here about graduate students' engagement and I sent an email that I was interested in participating but they needed people that were on campus. And I was willing to do it over the phone or whatever but they never got back to me. (Part-time student with RAships)

In further conversations, this student clarified that time restrictions are due to her full-time work hours and family life with children. These factors influenced how much time she could dedicate to her doctoral studies and any other learning opportunities. For instance, she recognized that her lack of awareness about the formal recruitment process for RAs may have been due to the fact that she was unable to attend the information sessions about RAships. As she explained, the sessions were offered during her full-time job hours and did not allow for students to join via remote access technologies:

Quite frankly I don't necessarily have the time because I'm working and then I have a very busy life with my family but I could attend a specific session for part-time students if I was given enough warning and I could plan for it. (Part-time student with RAships)

Participants without RA experience also shared how part-time status and other factors influenced their decisions to not undertake RAships or their inability to secure RAship opportunities. One of the three part-time students without RAships reported that her part-time status did not contribute to her lack of RAships. She did not feel isolated from the university because she felt supported by her supervisor and doctoral colleagues.

The only downside she identified was that there were not many RA opportunities for students located far away from the university. She indicated that one of the reasons she decided to participate in this study was to bring attention to administration to make RAships more inclusive for students located far away from the campus:

I don't feel that I'm in a different status than full-time students . . . . No, not at all but again I think it's because of my supervisor. We also have a very tight cohort so we have maintained good communication, and set up a good support system that way. My email comes really well and the library support is great. So I think there are many really good supports in place to serve students. I think that the RAship and TAsip piece is . . . and that's one of the reasons why I wanted to talk to you . . . . I don't think it would take a lot of work to find a place for part-time students and the distance students. (Part-time student without RAships)

The other two part-time students reported feeling isolated from the program and assistantships. They both identified distant locations as a factor affecting their lack of opportunities to engage in the research community on campus, including RAship opportunities. As one student explained, "the fact that I'm located far away from university definitely influenced it [access to research assistantships] because there were so few opportunities to do the work by distance" (Part-time student without RAships).

As explained by one participant, being a part-time student from a distant location made her less aware of what educational opportunities were available at the university. She indicated that she missed the seminars offered to graduate students, which included information sessions about RAships:

It [the location] does affect my opportunity to interact with people on campus and I do miss out on some seminars that are offered for graduate students because it takes a long time to get there. I can't always travel when they are available. (Part-time student without RAships)

One of the administrators also recognized limitations that can be associated with distant locations. She pointed out that part-time students' access to RAships may be restricted if they are not on campus regularly. However, she suggested that some work could be done from home and communication could be maintained via technology.

One part-time student specified that even if RAships for distant students would arise, she would not have the time to engage in them because of her full-time employment and family obligations. Therefore, another factor to consider would be the time constraints:

Part of it is that I'm just not familiar with what is available and I don't see or hear or get the notices about what is available. So part of it is just simple awareness. I'm not aware of what's available or what is becoming available. But even if I was, I don't know if I would have the opportunity to find time to take any of them. Now, it depends on what kind of time commitment they require and I don't even know that but I work full time. I would imagine that it would be difficult for me to add additional responsibilities for me of an RA on top of the work that I'm doing. (Part-time student without RAships)

She further clarified that she is committed to maintaining a balance between work and family life; however, family is always a priority. Therefore, she ensured she was well

organized to prevent her full-time work or her doctoral studies from interfering with quality time she wanted to have with her family:

Yes, there has to be work–life balance. So my life at home is my life at home and then the time that I have outside of that has to be divided between my full-time work and my PhD studies. And so any RAship would fall on the work side of the work–life balance. I protect my life at home quite vigorously. So there are certain periods of time that I don't let my work or doctoral studies interfere with my life. I'm not sure how flexible RAships are and whether that would allow me the flexibility. So often my PhD work is left for me to do after my child is asleep and then my work time is kind of 9:00–4:30 during the day. I have a very compartmental life style to get everything done that I need to do. (Part-time student without RAships)

As evident from this section, doctoral students with and without RAships described the ways part-time status and other factors influenced their decisions and experiences with RAships. The responses from the majority of students show that they felt isolated as part-time students from the university, the program, and a research community. Some students identified their distant locations as a factor contributing to their feelings of disconnect. As explained by most students, their work hours and family life influenced the amount of time they could dedicate to their studies and to educational opportunities such as RAships.

### **Regulations and Practices Specific to Research Assistantships**

All part-time students with and without RAship experiences expressed not being familiar with any documents specific to RAships (beyond the contract of employment

students with RAships would have signed). From their previous comments, however, it seems that some of students were aware of regulations such as the 10 hours per week policy for full-time students and the fact that priority for RA positions is given to full-time students:

As far as I know there are no documents or written regulations. I didn't see any.

There is no RAship handbook that I'm aware of. Other than apparently now RAs can go to the office of research and put in their CV and potentially get an RAship that way, which is a start. (Part-time student with RAships)

Both administrators also reported limited documents related to RAships. One administrator explained that there are some policies that may inform practice within RAships but they are not specific to assistantships and are scattered all over the place. As indicated in Chapter Four, during the time of data collection for this research study, a handbook specific to RAships was released but the doctoral students under investigation were unaware of it:

The GRAD application form [for funding] states that it has to be an educational experience, it doesn't include ethical and equitable though. There are some other policies but they are all over the place and they do not particularly target research assistants but might be applied to them like the academic integrity policy. But I don't think there is something more substantive than the handbook.

(Administrator)

As explained in the previous chapter, two research supervisors identified documents that had informed their practice within RAships. The other three research

supervisors reported relying on their past experiences as RAs and their intuition to guide their practice within RAships:

I'm sure there are [documents related to RAships] but I'm notorious for being ignorant as I can possibly be for rules and regulations. I tend to follow my instincts and every now and then it gets me into trouble but at large it works . . . . I try to treat research assistants respectfully and indeed as colleagues and not to exploit their labour and take credit for work they have done. I'm sure there are documents that reflect that approach I couldn't cite them by chapter and verse but my instinct is to operate on that. (Research supervisor)

One part-time student without RAship experience called for regulation that would make RAships more accessible for part-time students located far away from the campus. According to the student, with the technology available there are no reasons for excluding students who are not regularly on campus.

In summary, two students with and three students without RAship were not familiar with any documents specific to RAships. The responses from research supervisors and the two administrators confirmed existence of limited documents related to research assistantships.

### **Participants' Recommendations**

The part-time students with and without RAships provided recommendations about ways to improve access to RAships and enhance assistantships as research learning spaces. The responses from students are complemented with the recommendations from research supervisors and administrators.

Students with assistantship experiences advocated for more equitable opportunities for part-time students and fair regulations regarding distribution of RAships regardless of student status:

Have something that is equitable and it's not equitable at all. There is no equity when you are a part-time student. As far as I know there are no documents or written regulations. I didn't see any . . . There should be a protocol, there should be a procedure that puts aside students' full-time and part-time status and looks at who has never done an RAship and who could benefit from it and has some sorts of background that relates to it. Let's try making things more equitable. (Part-time student with RAships)

One of the part-time students called for enhancing advertisements for RAship opportunities and being transparent about available positions. Although the participant recognized that securing RAships in informal ways worked for her, she believed that these positions should be first advertised formally to allow all students to apply:

As a part-time student I never got any notifications about RAships. If there were any, we didn't hear about them. There is just no chance to find out about these opportunities if you are not on campus. Maybe they changed that now but when I was doing it there were no notifications, there were no spaces to say you are interested; I can't email every professor and say I want to be an RA. So the communication is very bad, there is just no information available to you . . . I don't see any reason why they can't send out the notifications of RA opportunities and allow people to apply based on the strength of their CV and also indicate if they have worked as an RA in the past and the timeframe of their availability.



Then make a decision that way as opposed to just those who know and those who don't. That's how they start to do TAs, now that's a little bit different because that's a unionized position. We get all these emails as grad students then why they can't do that for RAs as well. So just communicating and not giving it to the person you know. (Part-time student with RAs)

Part-time students expressed that everyone should have an opportunity to work as an RA at least once during their doctoral program. As one of the students clarified, this does not mean not being able to re-hire someone who worked already as an RA but those without experience should have priority:

I think everyone deserve a chance at least once to be an RA. I mean I wouldn't like to see the situation where everyone is handcuffed in terms of . . . if you built a background as an RA and there is nobody else there who wants the opportunity I don't think you should not be hired or re-hired. I think we have to be reasonable here but every single person who wants that opportunity should be allowed to have it. Now, if someone who is working full time and studying full time it can be hard to take on another task but there are moments when you can. Like it was for me during my residency but the opportunity wasn't available for me. So you can carve out the moments when you can give someone an opportunity. (Part-time student with RAs)

The administrators also recognized the importance of fairness and a searchable database; however, one administrator indicated that a database might not be as practical as anticipated. She felt that a database would not necessarily change the practice of those researchers who prefer to hire students with the most experience rather than provide

research exposure for those without experience. The following quotation illustrates this administrator's view:

It's a complex learning system, it's a complex research system so you have people who are just starting, you have people who are very experienced and continue working so that part is very hard to control. And I'm not sure if we should and how we could do this but having a database might be helpful. A searchable database, where you could verify okay this person had already two contracts then that person can apply next year. But the question is how practical would that be? What would professors say? They have the reasons why they hire a particular person. (Administrator)

Two students suggested making RAships part of the doctoral program to allow everyone within the program at least one RAship experience. One of the part-time students argued that it should be the doctoral research advisor's responsibility to create such opportunities for students:

It would be a good idea to make RAships part of the program. Instead of doctoral residency being useless like it was for me, why not doing RAships. The idea behind this residency is that you should learn how to be a scholar; well, my residency wasn't any good for that so why not to incorporate it [the RAship] as a required element to the doctoral residency and the supervisor has to create a situation where you are an RA. Make it part of a requirement from the supervisor, sure you can be a supervisor but you have to create opportunities. And that would actually fulfil what I see as an ethical obligation as a doctoral supervisor as well . .

. . Let's put a little bit more responsibility on that then, you have to hire your student as an RA. (Part-time student with RAships)

The other part-time student added that RAships enhance doctoral studies and the development of students' identities as researchers. Therefore, every student should have an opportunity to benefit from working with expert researchers within assistantships:

I think every single PhD student should have at least one [RAship] and it should be part of their graduation. So it should be a requirement . . . . They can do it part time or whatever but I think it should be a critical component because without that what sort of researcher are you. And to work with other researchers is an excellent opportunity and key to the PhD experience. I think [the program] definitely should have that.

The last recommendation coming from part-time students with RAships called for creating a formal document about RAships that all students would receive at the beginning of their doctoral program in order to ensure that all students were familiar with what RAships entail, how they can benefit students, and how to find them:

I think it would be nice to have . . . when you are introduced to PhD program you get a PDF version of the document something you can refer to all the time. Maybe an introduction to PhD studies and then introduction to [RAships] what this is and having somebody come in and saying these are the opportunities in the next couple of years and we didn't have that. We talked about SSHRC grants . . . . So we had that but we didn't talk about research opportunities and that should be part of the program. And then send out some sort of manual, going through all the jargon first of all, and then talking about potential opportunities, sending out

regular bulletins about other things that are available. (Part-time student with RAships)

Similar to their colleagues with RAships, all three part-time students with no RAships recommended increasing RA opportunities for students who are not regularly present on campus:

Last December that RAship was about doing database searches so why couldn't I do that from home? That didn't make sense to me. So I think that with not whole a lot of work and a little bit of creative thinking there are ways [to provide RA opportunities for part-time students from distant locations]. (Part-time student without RAships)

The participants voiced that the university should better utilize available technology to inform students about RAships and connect them with RA experiences. All three students without RAships argued that the location of students should not have such a high impact on their access to information and learning opportunities considering the vast conferencing tools available these days. As one student reported, the effective use of technology has the potential to increase students' connections to the research community and decrease their feelings of isolation:

The Faculty could make more of an effort to utilize technology to interact with students at a distance. So my recommendation would be that the university needs to make more of an effort to use the technology that is available to connect with students . . . . There were workshops offered to graduate students and some of the topics were interesting to me but for me to drive down for two hours it's challenging. So if those things could actually be broadcast, webcast, and archived,

I think the university should be doing that. Those things should be available for all sorts of graduate students to tap into. There is no good reason for not doing it.

(Part-time student without RAships)

Research supervisors also recommended using technology to advertise RAships:

Right now there is a lot of word of mouth that's how we find our RAs. There is also a book where they apply and they fill out their information and their interests so we have access to that. It's organized probably as well as it could be. Now, being a technology person I would prefer this type of stuff to be online and at my fingertips so I could have immediate access to their qualifications, their email address but there are some privacy issues around that. But if they could submit [RAship applications online] that would be wonderful. That way they could see who have reviewed their file, right now there is no way for them to know if anybody has even looked at their file or considered them. (Research supervisor)

As mentioned by another research supervisor, setting up an electronic database and updating the information on a regular basis would require someone to do that work, but this supervisor felt that work would be a necessary step forward in order to improve access to RAships.

In summary, doctoral students with assistantship called for fair regulations regarding distribution of RAships regardless of student status as well as a formal document about RAships describing what assistantships entail, how to find them, and how they can benefit students. Student with and without assistantships recommended increasing RA opportunities for students who are not regularly present on campus,

enhancing advertisement of RAship opportunities, utilizing available technology to inform students about RAships, and being transparent about available positions.

This section concludes the subcase of part-time students. In the next chapter, I present an overarching case of RAships for full-time and part-time doctoral students.

## **CHAPTER SEVEN: OVERARCHING CASE OF RESEARCH ASSISTANTSHIPS FOR STUDENTS**

The previous two chapters provided meaningful interpretation of eight full-time and five part-time students' experiences, complemented by responses from five research supervisors and two administrators as well as by relevant documents. The chapters presented the two groups of students as separate subcases to derive an in-depth understanding of RAship experiences for each group of students (full time and part time). This chapter presents similarities and differences within and across the two subcases and provides new ways of understanding the overarching case of RAships in doctoral education. This overarching case is enriched with scholarly literature and linked to the theoretical framework.

### **Doctoral Students in This Research Study**

Although this study focused on students' status as a factor influencing their doctoral RAships (or their lack of such experiences), I recognized that other factors (e.g., gender, race, age, and cultural background) also might influence doctoral students' access to and experiences within RAships. It was important for me to understand all factors that influenced their decisions and conditioned their student status and experiences. To that end, I sought to get a better sense of my participants by asking them to self-identify and to discuss any factors that influenced them to undertake full-time or part-time studies.

The 13 doctoral students who participated in this study include eight full-time students (four with and four without RAships) and five part-time students (two with and three without RAships); overall, six students had RAship experiences and seven did not. The forthcoming sections that are specific to engagement within RAships focus on the

experiences of the six students who worked as RAs, the perspectives of research supervisors and administrators, and information from relevant documents. The remaining sections draw from these sources as well as the interviews with the seven students who did not have experience as RAs.

Doctoral students ranged between the second and sixth years of their respective doctoral programs, and one had graduated (see Table 1). It is worth noting that three of the four full-time students without RAships were in the second year of their programs, which means they may have RAship opportunities in subsequent years of study. The four full-time students with assistantships were in the third, fourth, and fifth years of their programs. Four part-time students were in their third, fourth, fifth, and sixth years of study, respectively, and one former part-time student had graduated within the past two years of data collection.

In both the full-time and part-time student groups, women were overrepresented; only three full-time doctoral students were men. The majority of doctoral students were Caucasian and born in Canada; only two full-time students reported being born outside Canada. All students recognized English as their current dominant language. None of the participants identified as a visible minority or claimed Aboriginal ancestry. Not all students reported age; however, the range was fairly wide and included students in their 20s to 60s. All students were in committed relationships (married or in common-law partnerships) and eight participants (five females, three males) had children of various ages, from toddlers to adults.

Students indicated several reasons for undertaking their doctoral studies on full-time or part-time bases. The most commonly cited reasons from full-time students with



and without RAships were funding support and their family situations. All part-time students listed full-time employment interconnected with their family situations as their main motives. Additional reasons reported by the students included career enhancement and preference to fully immerse in the doctoral program.

The majority of full-time participants identified the 4-year funding package offered to all full-time students (see Chapter Four) as a significant incentive. The main funding package includes a graduate fellowship that requires no work and a graduate assistantship for students who work as teaching assistants, research assistants, language assistants, or instructors. For the past two years, the graduate fellowship amounted to approximately \$12,000 and the graduate assistantship to \$7,200 per year for each student (Administrator). Additional institutional incentive awards are also designated mainly for full-time students. For example, students who secure external funding are awarded an additional Faculty award for being successful applicants.

One of the full-time students without an RAship was unemployed when he applied for doctoral studies; therefore doctoral funding provided a needed financial contribution for his family. Another participant, who considered changing a career path, said that money was not an issue but funding for full-time students influenced his decision to enrol full time. In one case, a participant with full-time employment applied as a part-time student and was accepted on those terms; however, after securing a 1-year Ontario Graduate Scholarship the student switched to full-time status to qualify for the award and applied for a leave of absence from work. As the student indicated during the interview, she was hesitant to turn down the award and welcomed the time off from work.

One of the full-time students with RAships emphasized that although full-time studies seemed like the best option at the time of enrolment, she began to question her decision after her funding ended. The student further explained that the duration of funding is too limited because not everyone is able to complete a dissertation within the allowed four-year time period.

It was evident from students' accounts that family circumstances in terms of parental status and degree of financial security highly influenced their decisions to enrol in the program on full- or part-time bases. Two full-time students reported that parental obligations did not interfere with their doctoral program or engagement in assistantships because their children were adults. In contrast, the three full-time students with younger children described a necessity to maintain balance between doctoral studies and their family lives. As reported by one of these students, maintaining such balance was at times challenging: "My kids are at home they are as committed to what I'm doing as I am but I still have to be as committed to them. So the tension is always there" (Full-time student without RAships).

Financial security varied among full-time students and was not connected to parental circumstances (i.e., having small children or adult children). Some students felt financial stability by relying solely on their respective spouses' income for support, and others expressed the necessity to contribute an income to support their families. Participants who needed to secure an income emphasized the importance of working as teaching assistants, RAs, language assistants, or instructors in order to receive the full amount of the funding package.

Part-time students with and without RAships articulated that full-time employment provided financial security and health benefits for their families. As reported, none of the part-time students felt they could forego the financial benefits of their employment; therefore, undertaking full-time studies was not an option they had considered. Undertaking part-time studies allowed the participants to become doctoral students while maintaining full-time employment. One student pointed out that “there are not that many programs with such flexibility” in terms of offering full- and part-time options, whereas another part-time student claimed that there was no difference between full-time and part-time studies except funding, which was restricted to full-time students.

Similarly to full-time students, part-time students also identified parental status as a factor that influenced their decisions regarding full-time or part-time status. In two cases, students indicated they had looked for doctoral programs that would not take them away physically from their family lives. The students also described a necessity to maintain balance between their multiple roles. One student’s statement provides an overview of the many roles that other students also mentioned:

Doing a PhD full time was not an option for me for two reasons: the family and the full-time career. So PhD is really my third priority. First it’s family, work, and then PhD, although work and the PhD flip from time to time. Sometimes the PhD becomes more important than work but essentially the income from the job was important to sustain the family life at home. So switching to full-time studies wasn’t an option that I was prepared to consider at all. When I was looking for PhD programs I essentially limited myself to applying for programs that offered a part-time option. (Part-time student without RAships)

The voices of these students reflect scholarly literature indicating that juggling employment with doctoral studies and family can be quite challenging (Bates & Goff, 2012; Bayley, Ellis, Abreu-Ellis, & O'Reilly, 2012; Gardner, 2008). For instance, Bayley et al.'s (2012) study of 53 recent graduates' experiences across Canadian universities found that doctoral students encountered several challenges during their academic programs, including maintaining balance in their lives and financing their doctoral studies. Bates and Goff's (2012) autoethnographic study explored the authors' personal experiences as part-time doctoral students balancing multiple competing roles. As Bates and Goff explained, it can be quite challenging to be a parent and a doctoral student while working full time, therefore time management skills can be essential: "The challenge is in coming up with strategies to balance all the responsibilities and obligations that come from having several roles and in making sure that my role as a mother stays at the top of my priority list" (p. 371).

Three of the full-time students with RA experiences came to the program immediately after completing their master's degrees on full-time bases, thus it seemed natural for them to continue into the next level of graduate studies as full-time students. Full-time students also indicated that their personalities and preferences to immerse fully in the doctoral program (i.e., be on campus on a regular basis, participate in activities and events, experience academic life and research culture) motivated them to study full time: "I couldn't do it part time. I have to get on it and get things done otherwise nothing gets done" (Full-time student with RAships).

One part-time student expressed that she undertook a doctoral program in order to enhance her current career: "I have a full-time position and I see that completing my

graduate study degree as an opportunity to make me a better researcher” (Part-time student without RAs). Deem and Brehony (2000) examined experiences of social science research students in two universities in the United Kingdom, including an emphasis upon full-time and part-time students’ interests in research and access to the research cultures within their institutions. Their findings showed that while the majority of full-time students wished to become academics after completing their PhDs, part-time students reported doing research for personal development or career advancement.

Looking across the two subcases and taking into consideration those with and without RAs, it is evident that financial security and family situation—specifically parental status—were main factors that affected students’ decisions to undertake doctoral studies on a full- or part-time basis. Overall, students underlined the importance of financial security in terms of maintaining full-time employment, securing internal funding packages, or relying on a spouse’s income support. Multiple students drew attention to parental status; it was evident that those with younger children found it challenging to balance their multiple roles and responsibilities.

### **Access to Research Assistantships**

The majority of full-time and part-time students reported securing their multiple RAs informally as opposed to doing so through the established formal process. In most cases, full-time students were contacted directly by researchers familiar with their work ethics or through referrals from other professors. Meanwhile, part-time students attributed their success in securing RAs to being proactive, connecting with professors, and letting them know about their availability to work as RAs.

As indicated by one administrator, full-time students have priority to access RAships; however, “part-time students can be also hired if full-time students are not available. The idea is to support the full-time students who are not working and getting some additional income to support their studies and life.” Because part-time students tend to have full-time employment, they are not considered as a first choice for financial support through assistantships.

Doctoral students’ responses to interview questions about RAships correspond to information reported by the research supervisors who indicated finding RAs mainly through personal contacts (e.g., supervising students’ doctoral work, being on students’ committees, or having students in their courses) and recommendations rather than any formal recruitment process. As one research supervisor explained, she would prefer knowing the quality of students’ work prior to hiring them as RAs.

Two of the full-time students claimed they would have gone through the formal process of submitting their applications along with their CVs to the research office if they had not secured RAships informally. In addition, they indicated they would have sent out emails to researchers indicating their interest in RA positions if they had not acquired RAships without that step.

When students were asked specifically about factors that influenced their access to RAships, the full-time students with RAships indicated that students get hired as RAs based on the skills they bring to the project; they emphasized that students with requisite skills have greater chances of getting positions than those who need research training. These voices reflect the statement of one administrator who also mentioned that some researchers prefer hiring people who require little training:

[Research supervisors] will take students who will do their work for them and there is a training component to it but human nature being what human nature is, some people will give priority to those students with whom they worked before or who they feel can do it without a lot of training, without a lot of oversight.

(Administrator)

One of the full-time students without RAship experiences recalled receiving an email about an RAship opportunity to which she did not respond because she did not have the required skills indicated in the email. The student confirmed her willingness to learn new skills but deduced from the message that she would need to have the prerequisite skills to qualify for the position.

The theoretical framework of legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991) employed in this study indicates that newcomers to the community of practice require “access to a wide range of ongoing activity, old-timers, and other members of the community; and to information, resources, and opportunities for participation” (p. 101) in order to become full members. Doctoral students, who are the research leaders of tomorrow, develop their identities as researchers by engaging in research communities and doing research. Therefore, they need opportunities to acquire a sense of belonging to scholarly communities (Pyhäntö, Stubb, & Lonka, 2009). Affording doctoral students with legitimate peripheral participation implies granting them access to RAships as research learning spaces; conversely, limiting access to those who already possess skills to engage in RAships marginalizes students eager to acquire research skills and become part of the community.

McGinn et al. (2013) emphasized that RAships are educational opportunities, not just employment opportunities. To that end, they suggested, “It is critically important for assessments of the current competence of a potential research assistant to be balanced with assessments of the potential competence of the research assistant if provided with adequate support” (p. 87). On a similar note, Strike et al. (2002) argued that research supervisors must be mindful of equity in the appointment of RAs. Consideration should be given to the benefits RAships can provide to students instead of only to the extra time and challenges involved in training RAs. One full-time student explained, “[research supervisors] are always fishing for experience because they themselves are so busy that they don’t have time to dedicate to teaching students” (Full-time student with RAships). The idea of research supervisors having insufficient time to train RAs was also broached by another full-time student who reported, “so idealistically yes it is fair to engage new students [as research assistants] but realistically I think that professors would rather take someone with more experience” (Full-time student with RAships).

Students’ statements touching on research supervisors’ busy lives align with literature that reports faculty workload pressures and competing demands for time due to heavy teaching loads, pressure to conduct research and publish, and substantial administrative and service responsibilities (Austin, 2003; Deem & Brehony, 2000). At the same time, as reported by Strike et al. (2002), supervisors have academic responsibility to ensure RAships are educative, which means that supervisors must provide adequate instruction and support for RAs to undertake assigned tasks and to feel prepared to continue in research.



Several full-time students questioned the actual purpose of RAships given that some research supervisors prefer hiring students with existing research skills. For example, one student asked, “so what is research assistantship? Is it an opportunity to learn or opportunity to practice the skills you already have?” (Full-time student with RAships). Another student questioned why students should be expected to have a certain set of skills in order to work as RAs: “If we would have all the skills already than why would we even bother with RAships” (Full-time student with RAships). Such contemplations reflect Hinchey and Kimmel’s (2000) views about the ambiguity associated with the research and teaching services that graduate students provide to universities; although institutions may claim that research and teaching assistantships serve as ways for graduate students to learn the skills they will need as professionals, such students often perform tasks that are normally reserved for already skilled researchers. To that end, Hinchey and Kimmel urged institutions to consider whether “graduate students are novices who need assistantships to learn professional skills, or they are skilled scholars contributing immeasurably to the work of university” (p. 7).

As administrators indicated at the outset of this section, the priority in hiring RAs was given to full-time students; however, the majority of research supervisors in this study indicated they did not consider students’ status when appointing RAs. In addition, administrators reported limited input into professors’ selection of assistants: “We have no way of controlling what faculty members do, except for good will. I can’t force a faculty member to hire a person as an RA if they wish to hire someone else” (Administrator).

The research supervisors preferred hiring students who were responsible, dependable, and well organized. The main criteria researchers considered when hiring

RAs were students' general research skills, their ability to quickly engage in a research project, their availability during a specific time frame, and their interest in the research topic; some of the latter elements were more important than others for each research supervisor based upon individual preferences. However, it is important to note that such preferences corresponded to researchers' criteria for hiring doctoral RAs; the research supervisors clarified that they would have different expectations in terms of competencies and research training for master's students: "I expect to do some training and provide educational experiences for [doctoral RAs] but it should be less than I would do for a master's student—far less" (Research supervisor).

The majority of part-time and full-time students without RAships did not have much knowledge about RAships. Moreover, students emphasized that RAships are not well advertised and that it is difficult to foresee when such positions may become available. Students' responses aligned with those of research supervisors who confirmed that it was challenging for students to know what projects were available. Most researchers attributed the gap between available RA positions and potential candidates' awareness of these opportunities to a lack of electronic accessibility to such information. Access (or lack thereof) to information regarding RAship opportunities affects doctoral students' entry into research communities of practice. As Lave and Wenger (1991) stated, "The key to legitimate peripherality is access by newcomers to the community of practice and all that membership entails" (p. 100). Enhancing existing structures of access and upgrading to virtual accessibility of information may improve students' ability to secure and participate in RAships.

Three full-time students without RAships reported that they were unable to find such positions despite attending a workshop on the topic and being part of the research community through their frequent presence on campus. The main issue seemed to be the timeliness of when RAships were offered. Full-time students indicated that they often took on available positions rather than wait for a position that could be more beneficial for their professional development such as RA positions because they did not want to lose the paid fellowship portion of their doctoral funding package. Some students who quickly secured the first-available position were disappointed they were unable to accept more suitable positions that arose later because of the 10 hour per week limit and other personal commitments. As one said, “I got some emails sent to everybody about research assistantship opportunities but at that time I had a TA position and I knew that we can’t exceed more than 10 hours per week” (Full-time student without RAships).

Some students relied more heavily than others on funding to support their studies and their families. It was evident, especially in responses from two full-time students, that RAships provided full-time students with much needed financial support in addition to any educational benefits; thus, not knowing when RA positions would become available or not having necessary skills to qualify for assistantships put some students at a disadvantage. As Hinchey and Kimmel (2000) succinctly stated, “The more a student needs money, the less choice he or she has about work conditions” (p. 67).

Administrators recognized that graduate students undertake assistantships for a variety of reasons:

For some grad students, they are very eager to learn and they are not so focused on funds and for others it can be critical to actually earn the money. We are trying

to emphasize [to research supervisors] that doctoral students need to be educated and supported. (Administrator)

Although RAships' potential to educate and to provide financial support for students is recognized, some researchers viewed such positions mainly as employment. One research supervisor provided a number of reasons why he would hire solely students with existing skills necessary to effectively complete assigned tasks:

[Doctoral students] have so many hours that are allocated in terms of a contract, it's not indefinite, so within those hours they have to complete a number of tasks. And if a half of the time is taken up for me educating then obviously I'm paying for their education rather than paying for their service. I always have found unusual if doctoral students don't have some kind of prerequisite knowledge or skills coming in and being an RA. I ask why would they come and accept a job anyway and if it's only because they need the money it's not good enough for me. I mean I'm not going to give people my research money to help them pay for their rent. I think that's a systemic issue, it's important but it's not something I can solve through my research funding. (Research supervisor)

This research supervisor's views contradicted to a certain degree the major goals of allocating internal or external funding to researchers. As explained by one of the administrators, faculty members are obliged to provide research training to students when they receive funding.

In terms of distribution of RAships, part-time students advocated for equal access to such positions regardless of student status. As one student articulated, everyone should have the opportunity to work as an RA during doctoral studies. Although administrators

explained that efforts were made to hire students who did not have RAships, the process is not systematic for two reasons: (a) there is no database in place to show who had RAships and who did not, and (b) researchers hire students informally. One administrator indicated that researchers face deadlines and must progress with their respective projects in a timely manner. In addition, having limited internal funding, they sometimes prefer to hire people who can assist with a project for perhaps only a few hours to complete specific tasks to help move the project forward.

Two part-time students (one with and one without RAships) expressed disappointment regarding their residency periods, which did not offer them assistantship opportunities. As clarified in Chapter Four, part-time students must fulfil their residency requirements during the two doctoral seminars and two other consecutive terms. It is suggested in the program document (2013) that part-time students undertake two consecutive terms of residency after they have defended their comprehensive examinations and dissertation proposals. The residency period requires students to be on campus, which is intended to allow them to meet and work with faculty members as well as attend various functions and presentations at the university to help faculty members with their research. However, the two part-time students reported that they were unaware of any RAship opportunities available during their residency periods.

Administrators indicated that the residency period is meant to offer doctoral students “the opportunity to apply the theory to practice, opportunities to help them in their own research, and opportunities to work more closely with faculty members, especially to understand what it is like to be a faculty member” (Administrator).

However, based on the part-time students' responses, it seems that not all students benefited from full-time status during their residency.

As evident from this section, full-time and part-time students accessed RAships mainly through informal recruitment. Students' accounts align with research supervisors' reported practices of hiring students informally rather than formally. Full-time students noted that access to RAships is typically granted to students with existing research skills. This argument was reinforced by responses from research supervisors and administrators who confirmed researchers' inclination to hire students with general research skills who require minimal research training.

### **Reasons for (Not) Becoming Research Assistants**

Full-time and part-time students with RAships cited the acquisition of research experience in practical settings as well as additional income as their primary reasons for becoming RAs. Students' recognition of RAships as educational spaces to acquire research knowledge aligned with one administrator's statement that RAships provide space for "skill training, understanding the research process, understanding how much is involved in research which is always very surprising to people. Also, having the opportunity to work closely with a professor it's usually something that students appreciate." One of the part-time students became an RA to learn about qualitative and quantitative research; she was able to not only engage in conversations with the research supervisor about the project but also discuss aspects of quantitative research covered in her research methods course. Another full-time student added that she became an RA to learn how to do research from someone other than her doctoral advisor; it was important

for the participant to learn in a practical setting about different methodologies and different ways to collect data.

All full-time students with RAships listed securing income as one of the key reasons to become RAs. For example, one explained, “the second assistantship helped me to survive, to pay the bills” (Full-time student with RAships). One participant clarified that although originally her RAships were about learning research, and financial support was secondary, her motivation shifted to financial concerns after her funding was depleted: “It’s less about the experiences because I feel I have these experiences. If I took on any [other RAship], it would be more for the money” (Full-time student with RAships). Students’ responses reflect to some extent findings from a study investigating RA experiences of 17 doctoral students in Education at a university in British Columbia. Edwards (2009) found that students engage in RAships mainly for financial reasons followed by other factors such as working with a specific professor, learning research skills, and enhancing research productivity. Doctoral students in this study similarly identified these reasons; however, only one student cited working with a specific researcher as a reason to engage in an RAship. A few students indicated the importance of research productivity, but this possible outcome was not stressed as a main reason to engage in RAships. The fact that doctoral students in Edwards’ study, as in the present study, identified gaining research experience and securing income as main reasons to become RAs implies that (a) students are dedicated to their development as researchers and (b) students (especially those who study full time) rely heavily on funding and graduate assistantships during their doctoral work.

Several part-time students identified working with research supervisors, staying in touch with colleagues, and connecting with a learning community as reasons for engaging in RAships. One student reported that she became an RA to feel more connected with her colleagues and the learning community within the department; she felt that she needed such a connection as a part-time student since her visits to campus were sporadic. One of the administrators also observed that RAships allowed students to feel connected to a research community: “I think that [becoming an RA] helps PhD students to become a part of the research community because through that practice they get comfortable with the setting and tasks, they start feeling that they belong to this community” (Administrator).

One of the students indicated that originally she was not seeking RA opportunities but was invited by research supervisors to join their projects: “In the beginning it wasn’t me being motivated to be an RA. I wasn’t seeking out these opportunities, they kind of fell on my lap when they came to me” (Full-time student with RAships). Over time, these experiences made her realize she was gravitating more towards research than teaching, which led her to get involved in future RAships.

One full-time student, an aspiring academic, decided to become an RA for exposure to a variety of experiences during her doctoral studies and to increase her chances of becoming a university professor. Meanwhile another student was motivated to become an RA based on the positive accounts she heard from other students about gratifying assistantships through which students were offered opportunities to publish, present at conferences, and build mentoring relationships.



Considering students' collective perspectives on RAship experiences, it is comforting to see that the majority of students reported learning research as a main motivation. Their interest in research and acquiring research skills is conducive to their development as competent scholars and researchers. Edwards (2009) reported students might be underprepared for academic careers if they do not show interest in honing their research skills. Considering other motives, it is not surprising that securing income was another key factor that motivated full-time students to become RAs. As evident from students' responses, the funding package on its own was not enough to support their financial needs. Statements such as "the second assistantship helped me to survive, to pay the bills" (Full-time student with RAships) indicate that the importance of RAships as financial support cannot be minimized. It is also not surprising that part-time students identified connecting with colleagues and a learning community as reasons for engaging in RAships. Part-time students are not regularly present on campus (Bates & Goff, 2012) and thus may feel more isolated than their full-time counterparts at the university. Participation in RAships may provide them with the space to stay connected to their learning community.

The main reasons listed by full-time and part-time students for not becoming RAs included lack of information about RAships, poor advertisement of RA positions, low compensation for RAs, preferences to work as teaching assistants as opposed to RAs, interest to engage in projects related to students' research interests, distant locations, and focus on timely completion of doctoral studies.

One full-time student said that not knowing how to access information about the availability of RAships contributed to his lack of RAship experiences. The student

pondered how the program could be improved to better advertise RAships to make them more accessible:

For me, the reason for not becoming an RA would be lack of opportunity or lack of awareness even though, I suspect the opportunities could have been there. If I had known where to look I could have been more aware. So one thing that I wrote here for myself is how can we refine the process as grad program so we can access the opportunities in a timely fashion. So to know about [RAships], to know about them in time prior to making other commitments, and can there be an office or department that keeps track of which ones are being done and which ones are available. How we as graduate students find out about it. The program doesn't necessarily know about us because we are full time and part time from different geographic locations so is there a spot that we can go to see what's there. (Full-time student without RAships)

Two participants (one part-time and one full-time student) voiced the issue that RAships have low compensation rates compared to teaching assistantships. One student, after inquiring about a specific RAship opportunity, concluded that the RAship did not pay well enough for the amount of work and time involved. Ultimately, perceived inadequate pay and excessive workload were principal reasons to avoid RAships.

In addition, one participant with a teaching background admitted to being more interested in teaching as opposed to RA positions, which she attributed partly to a lack of awareness of what an RA position entails. The student also emphasized that her priority was timely completion of doctoral studies, therefore she was concerned that taking on too many concurrent projects might impede her progress: "At this stage I don't think I have

the time to do the teaching, take the courses, and pursue an RAship” (Full-time student without RAships). Administrators also recognized that full-time students might be too busy to undertake RAships, especially if they are involved in teaching and focused on completing their studies in a timely manner.

Two part-time students without RAship experiences were in unique positions whereby their careers closely aligned with their doctoral studies. Both students indicated that their workplaces allowed them to gain research experience that other students may hope to gain through RAships. One of these part-time students reported having the opportunity to work on different research projects that often resulted in conference presentations and publications.

Two part-time students identified that distance from campus limited their involvement in RAships. They also identified location as a factor affecting their ability to attend information sessions and workshops about RAships. This in turn affected their understanding of how to access RAships and the ways these assistantships were managed and distributed. These part-time students’ responses reflect personal experiences of doctoral students who also reported in studies by Bates and Goff (2013) and Teeuwssen et al. (2012) that distant location reduced their presence on campus and participation in university life, including educational opportunities.

In this study, one student reported contacting a research supervisor to express interest in an available RA position that involved editing and formatting manuscripts because she thought the tasks could be completed remotely. However, the research supervisor preferred to hire someone who could attend regular meetings on campus. As explained by one of the administrators, the distant location of part-time students might

limit their awareness of what RAship opportunities were available. The administrator also pointed out that some RA positions encompassed tasks such as literature reviews that could be accomplished from home with meetings held virtually.

One part-time student recalled an RA position that interested her as it was closely connected to her doctoral research. After inquiring about the project's expectations and tasks, she decided to forego applying because she realized that the time commitment outweighed its potential benefits.

Part-time students without RAships also recognized that as much as becoming RAs could be beneficial, it could also reduce quality time with their families and doctoral studies. One student said she would consider an RAship based on the following criteria: flexibility in terms of when the work was supposed to be done, connection to her own research interests, alignment with her doctoral study, and acquisition of skills that would contribute to the completion of her degree. For this participant, money was not an incentive (full-time employment provided sufficient income for her family) and the potential value of an RAship was related to possibilities to gain research skills and knowledge that would contribute to her progress and success in doctoral studies.

Clearly, there were multiple reasons why students did not engage in RAships. Some of the motives related to limitations within the program that were often beyond students' control (e.g., lack of information about RAships, poor advertisement of RA positions, scarce opportunities for students from distant locations). Other motives were based on students' decisions about what worked for them in terms of successful progress within the program (e.g., preference to work as teaching assistants as opposed to RAs, choice to engage in a project related to the student's research interest).

Students' arguments that lack of information about RAships and poor advertisement of RA positions limited their opportunities closely connected to lack of electronic accessibility to such information, as discussed in previous sections. Students and research supervisors recognized that it was challenging to know what projects were available.

For some part-time students, pay and workload were the biggest factors in deciding not to engage in RAships, which suggests that time pressures (doctoral program, full-time employment, family obligations) limited their ability to undertake another educational activity. As indicated by some students, in order to take on additional commitments, RAships would have to be highly beneficial to justify the time they would require. As one student explained, there was a cost–benefit analysis involved in all her decisions: “What is it going to give me in terms of additional skills or new knowledge, new connections, networking . . . it could be anything. And then what it’s going to cost me in terms of time” (Part-time student without RAships). Students’ full agendas made them very selective about the educational opportunities in which they chose to engage. As evident from students’ responses, some may prefer teaching assistantships over RAships (because of interest, higher pay, or lack of knowledge about what RAs do). Taking too many projects at the same time could slow down students’ doctoral studies and result in additional tuition fees.

### **Engagement in Research Assistantships**

All doctoral students who worked as RAs (full-time and part-time students) reported having between two and five RAships during their doctoral program. The experiences of doctoral students were different in terms of the actual length of the

assistantships and composition of team members involved in each project. Five of the six students reported being engaged (at least once) in a longer RAship (ranging from 1 year to more than 2 years); their other assistantships were a series of short contracts on the same project (between 40 to 80 hours each) or short contracts on different projects. This means that a majority of these RAs had a chance to be involved at least in one project for a longer period of time and thus engage in diverse tasks and activities (although not necessarily across the entire research cycle).

Four students (three full time and one part time) reported working with two or more research supervisors on the assistantships; two students reported having all their RAships with the same supervisor. Three students indicated working with their doctoral advisor on at least one of their assistantships. In terms of team members involved in the projects, four participants indicated that some of their assistantships involved other team members besides the RA and the research supervisor; however, only two students described collaboration with the other team members (university researchers, teachers, school board members, and graduate RAs). In the other two cases, students explained that although some of their assistantships were part of larger projects with multiple RAs and multiple researchers, they had contact with their supervisor only throughout the entire duration of the project.

One part-time and three full-time students mentioned having worked as RAs during their master's studies as well, which means they already had certain understandings about RAships and how to secure them prior to their doctoral studies. Some of the RAships were closely connected to students' research interests and others were not. One part-time student said that although one of the projects was on a topic that

was not particularly interesting to her, she benefited from the experience significantly in terms of learning about the research process and establishing a mentoring relationship:

I would have to say that that's one of the most important relationships in terms of me understanding research. That's where I really learned a lot about it. It's interesting because I was an RA in an area and a topic that really wasn't my interest. I did it to learn the research process. (Part-time student with RAships)

The above quotation provides evidence that engagement in RAships where the topic is not a perfect fit with doctoral students' research interests may also provide a valuable learning experience. However, some research supervisors preferred hiring students whose research interests match the project.

### **Benefits of Working as Research Assistants**

Each full-time and part-time student acknowledged the benefits of assistantships; even those who found their assistantships quite challenging recognized beneficial experiences derived from their positions. Students from both groups revealed that RAships contributed to the development of their identities as researchers and their drive to become competent researchers. One of the supervisors stated that doctoral students have much to gain working as RAs. She then added that sometimes research supervisors forget that these kinds of educational experiences contributed to their development as scholars.

Several full-time and part-time students attributed development of their identities as researchers to participation in a research community (e.g., participating in a conference, attending a writing retreat). For one student, feeling included in a group of scholars and being treated as an equal contributor influenced her perception of herself as

a developing scholar. In another case, participation in an international conference fueled a student's drive to become a researcher. In both cases, students' accounts provide testimony to the value of legitimate peripheral participation as a process by which newcomers participate in the actual practice of experts, engage in a community of practice, and eventually become full participants. As evident in the above-mentioned examples, the transformation or development of researcher identities arises out of co-participation among members of a research community:

As an aspect of social practice, learning involves the whole person; it implies not only a relation to specific activities, but a relation to social communities . . . .

Activities, tasks, functions, and understandings do not exist in isolation; they are part of broader systems of relations in which they have meaning. These systems of relations arise out of and are reproduced and developed within social communities, which are in part systems of relations among persons. (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 53)

Doctoral students need opportunities to acquire a sense of belonging to scholarly communities to develop their identities as researchers (Pyhäntö et al., 2009). To that end, most of the interviewed research supervisors said it was important to connect students to a research community and co-present or co-publish with them when feasible.

Students from both groups said they became aware of their identities as researchers rather than assistants through engagement in advanced tasks (e.g., crafting a grant application, collecting data, co-writing a research paper). One student expressed feeling like a research partner due to her deep immersion in the project: "I'm feeling more of a research partner in it and really helping to get into the depth of the research"



(Part-time student with RAships). Another student commented on her rich RAship where she had the opportunity to experience the entire research cycle under the supervision of experts.

Full-time and part-time students valued the opportunity to experience multiple steps of the research cycle, participate in advanced tasks, and feel like research partners. The literature demonstrates that students' engagement in meaningful research tasks contributes to their identity formation as confident and competent researchers (Grundy, 2004; McGinn et al., 2013; Niemczyk, 2010). It is important to note that the duration of an RAship often dictated how much exposure students had to the research process. On that note, one part-time and three full-time students indicated they valued longer RAships over short-term contracts. Involvement for extended periods of time allowed them to observe how the research unfolded and how each step interconnected. One student reported, "I think that being a part of that long-term project had the most impact on me as a researcher only because I saw the whole project through so to see all the different steps of the project" (Full-time student with RAships). Students' engagement in longer projects in which they had opportunities to experience diverse steps of a research cycle also increased their confidence in doing research.

Considering that participation in social practice is a fundamental form of learning, extended participation in a research community may be conducive to students' transition towards full participation in that community. As Lave and Wenger (1991) indicated, "Moving toward full participation in practice involves not just a greater commitment of time, intensified effort, more and broader responsibilities within the community, and

more difficult and risky tasks, but, more significantly, an increasing sense of identity” (p. 111).

Research supervisors recognized increased benefits when students fully engaged in their projects and wished for more funding to hire RAs for extended periods of time. All researchers agreed that internal funding allocated for the research development of graduate students is limited and external funding is very competitive. On a similar note, one administrator felt that ideal educational RAships would allow researchers to (a) engage students from the commencement of the study until the publication phase and (b) hire multiple RAs who could engage in conversations and learn from each other. All these possibilities are highly dependent on available funding and, as recognized by the administrator, “research dollars are hard to get.”

One of the research supervisors, although recognizing the need for more funding, explained that even 40 or 80 hours of funding contributed to students’ development as researchers and helped advance research projects. This supervisor’s comment corresponds to one part-time student’s belief that even though she was not involved in the projects for extended periods of time, the related tasks and activities influenced her development as a researcher. She appreciated the opportunity to learn new skills and contribute her existing skills to the project.

In terms of students bringing skills to the project, one research supervisor expressed that collaborations and students’ contributions to the project are main ingredients for learning to occur. Another research supervisor expressed her admiration for the skills that some RAs brought to her projects. She indicated that she learned from students and relied on their expertise.

Some full-time students noted that RAships allowed them to explore new research areas and provided them with new understandings:

It wasn't about specific tasks or activities, it was about what the project was about so the theme, the focus, the material that I was looking at. I was able to expand my knowledge, and that's where I was able to learn more about literature in those areas, about the key journals or key authors in those different areas, some of the theories and practices. So it was more about the topics and the content than the skills themselves. (Full-time student with RAships)

Two students specified that gaining broader knowledge about research and the focal topics of RAship projects could potentially link to their future work. Administrators and research supervisors also recognized the importance of RAship as professional development spaces. Both groups outlined potential benefits for students working as RAs, including applying theoretical knowledge to practice, exploring what it means to be a faculty member, gaining research skills to complete their dissertation research, and developing skills useful for their future employment.

Two students reported that RAships contributed to their doctoral dissertations. For example, one reported, "just doing literature reviews for that project really helped my literature review chapter for my dissertation. But there are other aspects from each of the other projects that had some impact on my doctoral research" (Full-time student with RAships). The responses of these two students represent an example of the potential of RAships as educational venues providing transferable skills training. The administrators explained that as part of the formal hiring process, an effort was made to match professors' research interests with those of graduate students. The stated intention was to

pair students with someone in a related field and thus maximize benefits of assistantships for students' doctoral work.

One full- and one part-time student highlighted that their experiences were invaluable and they gladly invested extra time in order to maximize their learning. One of the students described RAships as paid experiences to learn and grow.

When discussing the benefits of working as RAs, two part-time students indicated that their experiences showed them how to engage in RAships in an ethical manner and gave them a better sense of the type of supervisors they would like to become. As evident from the following quotation, RAship experiences provide students with ethics-related information they may wish to implement in their own practice:

I mean I can't say enough about how important being an RA has been to my development and my sense of self of who I want to be as a supervisor of RAs. So it's twofold because I was an RA I know what I want to do and what I don't want to do. And I think that the sense of ethics that I have is also partially because I was involved in two situations where my RAships were very ethical from start to finish. (Part-time student with RAships)

Overall comments reveal that RAships benefited full-time and part-time students alike. Both groups recognized that their RA experiences contributed to the development of their identities as researchers. Students reported that RAships exposed them to a research community, allowed them to develop research skills, built their confidence to undertake dissertation research, expanded their knowledge in areas beyond their own research interests, introduced them to practices to model (or avoid) in the future, and increased their chances to secure academic positions. Overall the findings suggest that

RAships have beneficial influences for RAs, research supervisors, research projects, and as a result the research community.

### **Challenges Within Research Assistantships**

Full-time and part-time students identified several dilemmas and tensions encountered during their assistantships, including two overlapping concerns: (a) a lack of community and support, and (b) irregular (for full-time students) and not face-to-face (for a part-time student) meetings with research supervisors. The full-time students also identified being hampered by solitary work, inadequate research training, lack of acknowledgement, issues related to collaboration on larger projects, health problems, and power dynamics. Part-time students also felt intimidated to communicate with researchers and undertake new research tasks, and uncertainty about RAs' roles. Similarly, several full-time and part-time students felt hesitant to voice their concerns to their research supervisors.

Three full-time students struggled with irregular meetings with their research supervisors that resulted in solitary work during their assistantships. The students experienced some check-in meetings either online or face to face; however, they wanted more frequent meetings to feel connected to the projects. For example, one described, “a little bit too much independence where I wouldn’t have regular contact with that person for a number of months so I would have liked a little bit more regular contact” (Full-time student with RAships).

One of the part-time students also expressed a concern regarding her meetings with the research supervisor. The student found it challenging to communicate with the research supervisor mainly via email rather than in person. Although contact with the

supervisor was maintained throughout the RAship and the assignments were well explained to move the project forward, she would have preferred face-to-face meetings to discuss research in depth and have a chance to ask ad-hoc questions. Some of her comments suggest that she did not feel comfortable voicing this concern to her research supervisor:

The first one was . . . many emails back and forth, which is fine but I would prefer talking to the person and really getting into the research, asking questions, and getting into the depth of it. And that's what I'm doing now [in the second RAship]. (Part-time student with RAships)

It is interesting to note that this part-time student called for meetings in person, though several other part-time students advocated for access to assistantships in which they could participate from a distance and communicate electronically. This seems to indicate that life circumstances (in this case, location) rather than students' status influenced students' preferences, expectations, and thus experiences. It is also evident that there is no single solution for accommodating the needs of all part-time students. The question remains how feasible is it to tailor RAships to students' individual needs or preferences? Ultimately, meeting the needs of all students can only be an ideal goal rather than a guaranteed outcome.

Full-time students who wished for more frequent meetings said that engaging in solitary and independent RA work made them feel disconnected from the projects and overwhelmed with assigned tasks. One student defined herself as a very independent person but wanted a closer connection to the projects. She added that she might have had a more positive experience if the projects had involved another RA with whom she could

collaborate: “I could have felt like I can talk more openly with [another RA] about struggles with particular tasks, how can we work through it together, that sense of community and support” (Full-time student with RAships).

On a similar note, one part-time student reported the lack of a learning community as a challenge for learning about new educational opportunities, including RAships. Although the student was engaged in RAships, she was not in contact with other colleagues during the assistantships or within the program in general: “I don’t really have a strong learning community and that’s something that I really need. And that not being around other people connects to not finding out about different opportunities. So it’s a big challenge that way” (Part-time student with RAships).

As stated earlier, the learning process under the conditions of legitimate peripheral participation relies on interactive involvement through which the novice (in this case, an RA) performs tasks and activities and observes the practice of an expert (a research supervisor). Solitary work of students with marginal collaborative engagement in research and limited connection to researchers and other research team members significantly limits the potential of the learning experience and therefore hinders the development of independent researchers.

Irregular meetings with research supervisors entailed another reported challenge: limited research training. Two students internalized lack of training as their own responsibility and evidence of potential shortcomings in terms of their skills. One of the students felt accountable for meeting her research supervisors’ expectations and was hesitant to contact them for assistance given their busy schedules. Because of these internal pressures and hesitation, the assistant felt she had to figure out a way to complete

the assigned tasks by herself. Similarly, another full-time student also reported that a lack of training compelled her to complete some of the tasks on her own. The process of discovering how to complete certain tasks took longer than she anticipated; as a result, she felt guilty about spending extra time on learning rather than advancing the project. Still, both RAs seemed to understand why the respective research supervisors did not (or perhaps could not) provide the necessary training. Interestingly, while justifying professors' busy agendas, students were making harsh judgements of themselves: "I felt a little dissatisfaction with myself" and "I felt almost this internal pressure." This may indicate that students are saturated in academia with the messages of professors being extremely busy and thus accept as the status quo research supervisors' lack of time to invest in students' development as researchers. This acceptance may also relate to the fact that students have too much to lose to question existing power arrangements. This connects to Hinchey and Kimmel's (2000) argument that one of the reasons why institutions have so much power over students is that students assume they occupy "a 'natural' position at the bottom of a new hierarchy, and—like other oppressed groups—accept their apparently powerless position without questions, as some sort of natural 'way things are'" (p. 37). McAlpine and Amundsen's (2012) study also showed that doctoral students often place responsibility for addressing encountered difficulties on their own shoulders, rather than asking for help or "seeing it as a structural issue that might require an institutional response" (p. 687).

A number of research supervisors acknowledged their responsibility for training RAs. For example, one reported, "I feel that I have responsibility as a research supervisor to make sure that the research assistant is comfortable with the tasks and the deadlines for



their completion. And there is this ongoing monitoring and support” (Research supervisors). At the same time, the majority of research supervisors and both administrators recognized high academic demands in professors’ careers as a factor influencing their level of participation in students’ research training. One of the administrators thought that professors’ levels of dedication to training future researchers might be connected to differential stages in professors’ careers:

At the beginning of their career [professors] need to be more focused on research and getting credit for their own research. Later on when they are tenured it may be easier for them to focus their attention on developing the student because they don’t have to worry about their own survival once they are tenured. They tend to be driven anyway but that’s less of an issue for them. (Administrator)

The above statements imply that research training of doctoral students is not a priority for all. Hinchey and Kimmel (2000) argued that graduate programs must serve student needs first as opposed to graduate students functioning as resources to serve the needs of the university through low-cost teaching and research services (p. 10). The hiring of RAs should be predicated on students’ needs (e.g., learning and enhancing research knowledge and skills, connecting to a research community, engaging in dialogue with a scholarly community via presentations and publications) rather than on merely assisting research supervisors to speed up the progress of their research agendas. While it is not wrong to consider doctoral students as resources to help research supervisors with their research projects, there should be some reciprocity and greater recognition that research training is a responsibility for professors.

Another challenge reported by full-time students corresponds to collaboration on larger projects. In one case, the challenge involved negotiation between research team members' research methods and different working and writing styles:

In the project, when I worked with my supervisor and another doctoral student the way that they completed research I think all three of us had different ideas of how it should be conducted and how we should analyze the data. So I think just coming to a compromise between us . . . probably took a little bit longer than we have expected or wanted it too but it certainly did work out at the end. (Full-time student with RAships)

On a similar note, another full-time student reported that organization and communication issues led to tensions within the project, especially when two lead researchers had divergent opinions. As recognized in the literature, a lack of organization and leadership within projects may place doctoral student RAs in uncomfortable positions (Edwards, 2009).

Timing in terms of scheduling meetings and respecting deadlines was identified as another challenge when working on projects involving several team members. As one full-time student stated, "timing sometimes can be an issue, especially when people are not responding to their emails" (Full-time student with RAships).

Two full-time students with RAships expressed their frustration about not being recognized fairly for their work. They felt that although they performed advanced tasks and contributed significantly to the projects, they were treated as novices rather than collaborators and after the contracts were finalized they did not feel they were properly acknowledged for their efforts. As one student noted,

To me it feels like research assistantships have no intellectual property. It's like with the contract you are signing all the rights to someone else. It seems like you are so much below [the research supervisors]. And realistically, in many projects you are not just organizing things and assisting, you are not just helping them, you are doing it for them. If I'm coding and doing the analysis for you then it seems more like we are co-researching. I mean it would be different if you would train me and I would do your data collection then call me an assistant. But if I bring the skills to the project and I'm involved in the analysis, writing, reporting I would say that's my intellectual property. That's my brain work not someone else's. I don't understand how it's acceptable that I do it and then someone else slaps their name on it. To me it's so wrong and makes me not want to participate. It makes me feel like I'm doing someone else's job. Well we are. (Full-time student with RAships)

In terms of tangible outputs from RAs' work, one doctoral student who had multiple RA experiences found it disappointing that none of her assistantships offered publication or presentation opportunities. She emphasized that publications are very important for aspiring academics, thus she hoped for such opportunities in her RAships: "It's something I feel that was really missed and that I could benefit from. Instead, I had to look for those opportunities on my own outside of the research assistantships" (Full-time student with RAships).

As evident from the above statements, some students did not feel fairly recognized for their contributions to the projects for which they worked as RAs. Based on the data set from doctoral students, it is difficult to establish if students' contributions to

the projects were sufficient for being considered co-authors. I would need more information to validate RAs' statements, probably including verifying the information with the named authors, which would necessitate revealing participants' identities, so I did not solicit verifying information.

Although RAs' statements regarding lack of recognition cannot be fully validated; their perceptions and feelings should not be ignored. It is important to reflect about ways to better inform RAs about the requirements for authorship and about the complexity of work that goes into the execution of a research project. Potentially, it might be student's lack of awareness of what authorship entails that affects their reported perceptions.

McGinn et al. (2013) provide empirical evidence for the educative potential of a research assistantship. Throughout an 8-month RAship contract, the research supervisor showed a conscious decision to enrich the RA's educational experience. During the meetings, the research supervisor went beyond discussions about the tasks associated with the project and engaged in conversations about other research, graduate education, conference attendance, and the importance of publications. These conversations, not directly related to the research project, allowed the RA to become aware and informed about various aspects of academic life. It was evident that the research supervisor cared about the RA's learning, not just the research project.

According to the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (2010), authorship credit is meant for those who substantially contribute to a study and not only those involved in the actual writing. The substantial contributions may include designing the research study, conducting data analysis, interpreting data, or writing major parts of the paper. Other contributions such as collecting data, entering data, or recruiting

participants do not meet requirements for authorship but might be recognized by a note within a publication. The Publication Manual also indicates that it is essential to determine authorship early in a research project. It is an especially useful practice when the collaboration includes students and faculty members (or RAs and their research supervisors):

The collaborators should decide on which tasks are necessary for the project's completion, how the work will be divided, which tasks or combination of tasks merits authorship credit, and on what level credit should be given (first author, second author, etc.). Collaborators may need to reassess authorship credit and order if changes in relative contribution are made in the course of the project. (p. 18)

One full-time student admitted experiencing physical challenges (e.g., headaches, eye strain) when completing RAship tasks in addition to her doctoral work. The RA did not anticipate these kinds of challenges, which affected completion of assigned tasks as well as her own doctoral work. One of the part-time students revealed experiencing personal trepidations. She talked about her initial fears and struggles to communicate with researchers and to undertake new research tasks. Nevertheless, after she completed some of the new tasks (e.g., conducting interviews) she realized they were not as challenging as they first appeared. On a similar note, one of the research supervisors pointed out the importance of RAships as venues that promote students' feelings of belonging to a scholarly community. The research supervisor also emphasized that providing students with positive RAship experiences might ameliorate their initial intimidation within the program.

Another challenge expressed by a part-time student related to uncertainty about the parameters of her role as an RA and the level of contribution she should make to the project. The doctoral student found it challenging to regulate herself in terms of not overstepping the role of an RA and doing too much. Further conversation with the student about her concerns revealed a connection to her limited awareness of what RAs' roles may actually encompass. The student's personal interpretation of the position was that she should be assisting and the research supervisor should be in charge of completing the main tasks and taking final decisions.

It seems evident that there is a need for more clarity within the program about the purpose of RAships as well as the roles and responsibilities of those engaged in RAship collaborations. The Faculty document (2014) explains that the purpose of RAships is to conduct sound research while facilitating professional development opportunities for students and researchers. RAs play supportive roles that allow them to assist research supervisors with their projects and, at the same time, to develop their identities as researchers. Hands-on engagement in various tasks and activities provides RAs with practical ways to enhance their existing research knowledge and skills. Doctoral students may pursue RAships for various reasons, including securing financial support, gaining experience in specific research task (e.g., interviewing), co-participating in research, co-authoring publications, or networking with a larger research community. Research supervisors are research experts in positions to share their knowledge and prepare the next generation of researchers. Research supervisors secure the help of RAs to develop their programs of research, fulfil their responsibilities to supervise students, meet

requirements for promotion, and maximize their professional abilities (e.g., develop their supervisory skills).

It is essential for RAs and research supervisors to be fully committed to successful progress of their research project and to respectful collaboration.

Communication is key to facilitate these commitments. During initial RAship meetings, the goals of the project and expectations of RAs and research supervisors should be clearly identified. That way, both parties are fully informed about their expected roles and responsibilities within the project. As stated earlier, RAs may engage in RAships for diverse reasons. Therefore, clear understanding from the outset of what the RAship is expected to entail would allow them to reflect upon the required responsibilities and make decisions about whether they do or do not wish to become involved. Ideally, well-defined tasks and activities promote mutual satisfaction from the RAship experience and limit potential conflicts.

Another challenge identified by two full-time students referred to supervisors' personalities and their hierarchical attitudes towards students. In both cases, the students felt that their supervisors did not treat them as collaborators and were not interested in mentoring. One full-time student indicated that the research supervisor claimed she was providing a good educational experience merely by allowing an RA to be part of the project. In reality, the student felt that she was not accepted as a collaborator, not recognized for her work, and too intimidated to voice her concerns.

It is evident that full-time and part-time students encountered several challenges during their RAships. Some of these challenges were more organizational in terms of the program itself, such as lack of community and support. Other challenges related to

practices set by their research supervisors, such as irregular meetings, isolated work, inadequate research training, and lack of acknowledgement. The following section provides a more detailed description of participants' relationships with their supervisors.

### **Relationships With Research Supervisors**

Full-time and part-time student RAs indicated having multiple RAship experiences; therefore, it makes sense that they could have reported benefits and challenges encountered within their RAships as well as positive relationships and negative relationships with some of their research supervisors. Two out of four full-time students and both part-time students reported positive relationships only. One full-time student reported positive and negative experiences and one full-time student commented on negative RAship experiences with research supervisors.

Students who commented on positive relationships with their research supervisors (three full-time and two part-time) described support and mentorship from supervisors who they felt were dedicated to their development as researchers. One participant explained that her supervisor not only contributed to her development as a researcher but also created a learning environment that allowed her to feel like a colleague and collaborator: "I developed my identity as a researcher, I would define myself as a researcher, and I see this professor and I as colleagues that work together; meanwhile I started as an RA" (Part-time student with RAships). On a similar note, one full-time student described the relationship with his supervisors as follows: "I will use the words of my doctoral supervisor who said that he considered me 'more of a colleague than a student.' Those are his exact words" (Full-time student with RAships). Students' statements aligned with comments of a few research supervisors who viewed RAships as



opportunities for mentoring and collaborative learning. One research supervisor emphasized the importance of mentorship saying, “for me it’s important to have not only the worker bee but it is a part of my job to mentor. And that’s the educational component and the training.”

One of the part-time students referred to her relationship with one of the research supervisors as co-mentoring. The student valued her relationship with the supervisor because of co-mentoring and working together towards a common goal. The RA brought skills to the project that her research supervisor lacked, which meant that they were able to rely on each other’s strengths: “Since my knowledge of statistics is greater, more recent than hers, I’m able to contribute versus just doing a task. There is lots of talking back and forth and asking questions and then me making suggestions” (Part-time student with RAships). The previous quotation illustrates well the idea of working together with a common goal to make a project successful. As the research supervisor expressed, an RA is not working for her but for a project. The research supervisor’s approach to collaboration as working together for the project rather than as an RA working for the research supervisor limits the presence of power dynamics within RAships. As Garrett (1997) explained, the supervisor “sets the tone” (p. 229) of the relationship and has the ability to maximize or minimize students’ feelings of power or powerlessness. As a research supervisor observed,

I feel that I have responsibility as a research supervisor to make sure that the RA is comfortable with the tasks and the deadlines for their completion. And there is this ongoing monitoring and support. She also knows that she is not working for me, she is working for the project. (Research supervisor)

Working together, co-learning, and co-mentoring are all elements of a healthy community of practice resulting in a sense of belonging and mutual commitment to reciprocity (Floding & Swier, 2012).

One full-time student expressed gratitude towards her research supervisors for supporting her plans to become an academic and providing her with guidelines for publishing in peer-reviewed journals. She also emphasized the importance of the peer mentoring in one of her RAships where she and another doctoral RA shared their knowledge and relied on each other for support. In contrast to a traditional concept of mentorship where an older and wiser individual supports the development of a younger individual, peer mentorship relies on students receiving support from fellow students (Heirdsfield, Walker, Walsh, & Wilss, 2008). Some researchers consider peer mentoring as a best practice for recognizing students' intellectual and practical knowledge and for fostering their learning (Badger, 2010; Huizing, 2012).

One part-time student expressed appreciation for having an opportunity to publish with the research supervisor and to have tangible evidence of her involvement in the RAship. She expressed satisfaction with seeing many months of intense research work manifest into a publication. This appreciation for a publishing opportunity aligns with a statement from one of the research supervisors regarding publishing with RAs: "I think that research assistantship relationship should be quantifiable for a student and able to be reproduced, for example on their CV, as a real contribution as opposed to a support role." Another research supervisor also pointed out the importance of providing publication opportunities for her students: "I like to work with graduate students for the obvious reasons like collecting data, getting as much data as I can but I always have co-published

with them . . . so there is mentoring that happens.” Both researchers believed that it is important for them to invest time in students’ professional development and engage them in written dialogue with a research community. However, it is also important to recognize that not every RAship can provide publication opportunities. There are several factors to consider, including the duration of the assistantship, the stage of the project when the RA is hired, and the contributions made by the RA to the project.

As evident from this section, many RAships delivered very positive experiences to doctoral students; however, while two full-time and two part-time students experienced positive relationships with their research supervisors, two full-time RAs (one with positive and negative experiences and one with negative experiences only) expressed being disappointed with their relationships with their respective research supervisors. One of the students described her relationship with her research supervisor as very formal and hierarchical. She explained that although the hierarchical order and high expectations were very clear from the first meeting, she decided to take on the assignment as she wanted an opportunity to grow as a researcher. Early in the project, the research supervisor made the RA promise that she would not quit as the previous RAs had done. The request put pressure on the RA and made her feel trapped in a project about which she knew very little at that time. She was not sure what this commitment would entail, but stayed on the project as she did not want to upset her research supervisor. The student felt a strong power differential in the way the research supervisor spoke to her and the extent to which every conversation seemed to be all about getting the work done: “I came almost to feel like a second class like subhuman in the way that I was treated” (Full-time student with RAships). The RA emphasized that the research supervisor seemed

extremely busy with no intention to become a mentor. Deem and Brehony (2000) argue that academic pressures experienced by researchers leave little time for supervision of research students and some supervisors may transfer their workload pressures onto doctoral students.

Another RA also struggled to characterize her relationship with one research supervisor as a mentoring relationship. She reported feeling disappointed because of the lack of communication and mentorship. Two full-time students felt that they were not able to freely express their concerns. Based on the treatment and interaction with the supervisors, both students decided to endure in silence rather than express their concerns. As one of the students summarized, “overall, [my RAship] I would say was highly negative and over time I came to feel unhappy, unsatisfied, and unfulfilled” (Full-time student with RAships). Another full-time student said that although the supervisor talked about communication and collaboration, it was not evident in practice. The participant said she felt disregarded whenever she made a comment that was not aligned with her supervisor’s opinion. As a result, the participant decided to avoid situations that could create an awkward relationship that could carry over even after the project ended.

In addition, the two RAs with negative experiences thought that talking with their supervisors or reporting their concerns to someone else could potentially affect their reputations with the department and result in other researchers being hesitant to hire them as RAs in the future. These doctoral students felt unsupported, exploited, intimidated, and powerless in terms of dealing with their situations. One student indicated she feared that reporting the conflict could jeopardize completion of her doctoral degree rather than

solve the problem. This in turn represents the related issue that students do not feel protected by organizational structures that are in place to serve them.

The above-reported students' pressures, particularly the experience of a full-time student whose research supervisor made her promise that she would stay on the project and not quit, connects to Morris's (2011) study exploring doctoral students' experiences with supervisory bullying. Although the study focused on doctoral supervisors rather than research supervisors of RAs, Morris' findings reflect issues in the research supervisor relationships identified by the two dissatisfied full-time students in this study. Morris relied upon data drawn from the personal experiences of doctoral students and bystanders who had written about their own or a friend's doctoral experiences on publicly available Internet blog sites. The following themes emerged from an analysis of eight blogs: confusion, unrealistic work demands, criticism, anger and rage, inappropriate attention, and abuse of power. Bloggers described several forms of abuse of power, including physical, emotional, and academic power. Several bloggers wrote about supervisors' dictatorial and commanding attitudes, unrealistic work demands, and the frustrating and condescending tone of their interactions. The bloggers expressed confusion about where to go for advice or assistance. As Morris asserted, it is alarming that such incidents take place in educational institutions and it calls into question the number of unreported cases of power abuse with characteristics of bullying.

Macfarlane (2010) in his work about values and virtues in qualitative research brought attention to the virtues of researchers as a way to live research ethics. He referred to virtues as actions and behaviours based on ethical principles and argued that "virtues are closely connected with human emotions and personalities. Nobody is perfect, and it is

important to recognize that a virtue approach is about realizing the importance of trying to improve through practice” (p. 23). Macfarlane’s argument leads to a deeper reflection about what kind of research supervisors’ behaviours, attitudes, and practices should be considered acceptable. Considering that two full-time RAs reported feeling unsupported, exploited, intimidated, and powerless in one or more RAships should encourage research supervisors to reflect on their virtues and motivate them to improve their supervision practices.

One of the full-time doctoral students reported asking colleagues for advice on how to approach her supervisor and voice her concerns but at the end felt too intimidated to confront the research supervisor. In one case, the supervisor was also the RA’s course professor, which put extra pressure on the student. The full-time student in the latter case was concerned that her relationship with the research supervisor could potentially influence her performance within the doctoral course.

The full-time students’ accounts are echoed by administrators’ responses indicating that working on RAships with doctoral advisors or course instructors may pose additional tensions for doctoral student RAs “because there is a power dynamic and it may put you in a vulnerable position. So it’s kind of more tensions there” (Administrator). The literature indicates that graduate students employed at universities may find themselves in vulnerable positions, especially when their academic advisors or course instructors oversee their RAships (Skorobohacz, 2013). Although there is a possibility that RAs working under the supervision of their course instructors or doctoral advisors may benefit from their mentorship (especially if their research interests and areas of study interconnect), it is also possible to encounter challenges due to these dual

relationships. As Skorobohacz (2013) explained, students may encounter several tensions working as RAs for their instructors: “There can be tensions when mixing money and marks” (p. 210). RAs may find themselves in vulnerable position and hesitate to ask questions or raise concerns when course grades or thesis progress may also be involved. RAs may feel pressure to accommodate all of the research supervisor’s expectations and not to voice their concerns since they depend on researchers for potential future research experiences, positive letters of recommendation, and grades (Naufel & Beike, 2013; Sanders, 2012). As Teeuwsen et al. (2012) indicated, “An openness about expectations from the very beginning and negotiation of meaningful roles and responsibilities can help alleviate but not eliminate power differentials” (p. 692).

The relationships that two of the full-time students expressed having with their research supervisors show the potential power dynamics of RAs. In fact, several participants from all three groups (doctoral students, research supervisors, and administrators) recognized the existence of power dynamics within RAs. One of the researchers explained that it took time to establish relationships in which students could eventually see themselves as “partners on the projects” rather than as subordinates:

I felt very uncomfortable starting with this RA a month ago about the power dynamic. I don’t think she fully gets it yet but she also has some cultural differences so I sense just from her body language she is still feeling that I’m the one who is telling her . . . I’m the boss so to speak. So I hope that she will see that’s not the case. So about the relationship with research assistants is this power piece, I have to remind myself that it takes time to get rid of some of those assumptions or to work through some of those assumptions. I hope I don’t come

across that way but they just there, the institutional assumptions. (Research supervisor)

In summary, doctoral students reported different experiences with their research supervisors, which eventually influenced their experiences as RAs and their development as researchers. Accounts of positive relationships showed that engaging in research together could provide space for mentoring and growth of RAs as has been found in prior research (Jiao, Kumar, Billot, & Richard, 2011); however, it is also evident that some relationships were quite negative and even exploitative (Grundy, 2004; Hinchey & Kimmel, 2000). It seems fair to conclude that experts within the community (researchers) have the power to confer legitimacy on newcomers (RAs). Research supervisors may facilitate or limit students' participation in research communities (e.g., through meaningful tasks, conference presentations, workshops, or publications). To a certain degree, research supervisors control access to the kinds of experiences to which RAs are exposed. How research supervisors exercise this power is critical to RAs' development as future researchers.

### **Educational and Ethical Research Assistantships**

I asked participants to explain what ethical and educational RAships meant to them. As evident from Chapter Four, several internal and external documents encourage educational and ethical RAships. There are also guidelines pertaining to respectful partnerships (faculty document, 2014) and commitment to students' welfare (AERA, 2011). Therefore, I was interested to discover my participants' understandings about educational and ethical RAships and to find out if RAs considered their experiences to be educational and ethical.



Full-time and part-time students expressed similar views regarding what educational and ethical RAships should represent and deliver. The full-time students envisioned educational RAships as those that increased their research knowledge and skills. Part-time students added that educational RAships are about learning research by doing and participating in research:

Educational would be learning, being exposed to new areas of research, being exposed to different ways of doing research, and all the methods involved in doing qualitative and quantitative research. I think it's very important to actually listen to it, see it, and watch it. But also participate in research. (Part-time student with RAships)

Research supervisors listed similar elements when describing educational and ethical RAships. One of the researchers also emphasized that RAships may serve as an important part of students' doctoral programs since many activities and contributions can eventually become comprehensive examination tasks and demonstrate students' development as scholars. The research supervisor also added that the program by design almost requires that assistantships be educational and ethical and "if this is not the case then there is something wrong and we are not doing justice to the philosophy of our doctoral program" (Research supervisor).

In terms of assistantships being ethical, students expected to be treated fairly, be recognized for their work, and feel valued. They also voiced the need for reciprocity and mutual benefits. One part-time student viewed ethical and educational aspects as being intertwined in quality assistantships. Similarly, one of the research supervisors stated that ethical conduct is a prerequisite for an educational RAship experience. As indicated in

the following quotation, all involved in the project need to have a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities from the outset of their collaborations:

First and foremost the research assistantship experience has to be ethical. I mean that is step one, if it's not then it really doesn't matter what happens beyond that. So the understanding of the responsibilities of the doctoral student and the research supervisor, responsibilities that both have to the institution and ultimately to the field that they are committing to in terms of everything from fraudulent data analysis to giving proper credit for work completed by a doctoral student and sharing of the outcomes, all that has to be upfront. So that kind of relationship needs to be established. (Research supervisor)

Both administrators emphasized that RAships should be educational and ethical. One administrator highlighted that “the ethical part is the hard part. There are power differentials and faculty members are their own unique individuals so some are easier to work with than others” (Administrator).

Macfarlane (2004) explored ethical aspects of teaching practice and the virtues they imply. In his work, he described ethical responsibilities of university professors and identified several virtues such as respectfulness, sensitivity, and fairness, which also reflect different aspects of personality. According to Macfarlane, these virtues are timeless ingredients that good reflective professors should possess. In his further work about researching with integrity (Macfarlane, 2008), he argued that the position and role of a professor is a privileged one in the exercise of power in lives of students. This privilege, according to Macfarlane (2008), demands that particular attention be devoted to the development of the moral character of professors in higher education.

In connection to the above-mentioned exercise of power in students' lives, Macfarlane (2008) brought attention to the inequalities of power in student–supervisor relationships and provided an example of a student research assistant who after conducting data collection and data analysis was not given proper acknowledgement for his contributions. Macfarlane argued that “good doctoral supervisors will recognize and not seek to exploit the power imbalance between them and their graduate students” (p. 119).

Strike et al. (2002) argued that it is an ethical obligation of academic supervisors to ensure RAs are educational and to attend to the welfare of individual RAs. The ethical obligations are not one sided: doctoral student RAs have responsibilities toward research supervisors and a duty to adhere to the ethical dimensions of research (Rossouw & Niemczyk, 2013). As indicated by one of the administrators, the academic environment is quite hectic, which can hinder supervisors' full engagement in RAs. This corresponds to Baker and Lattuca's (2010) view that supervisors often find they must direct multiple research projects simultaneously, which may compromise the attention they are able to give to individual RAs.

After explaining their interpretation of educational and ethical RAs, doctoral students with RAs were asked if they considered their RA experiences as educational and ethical. The two part-time students classified their RAs as educational and ethical. They learned research, experienced mentorship, and felt recognized for their contributions. As evident in the preceding Relationships With Research Supervisors section, the part-time students described only positive relationships with their research supervisors; in contrast, the quality of full-time students' relationships varied.

Overall, full-time students considered their experiences as educational although some assistantships did not meet students' full expectations and others were educational in terms of what not to do. This latter perception was consistent with a comment made by one administrator, who pointed out that less positive experiences also include learning: "Sometimes things are educational in a negative sense because you learn about politics of everything involved and how to deal with different personalities . . . but that's a good thing as well because that's the way the world works."

In terms of RAships being ethical, responses varied among full-time students. Some students praised their supervisors for treating them as equal collaborators and investing extra time in their professional development. One of the full-time students brought attention to reciprocity as an ethical element within RAships. According to the student, reciprocity was evident in her research supervisor's commitment to developing her identity as a researcher and building her profile as an academic. Another full-time student reflecting on educational and ethical expectations for assistantships expressed that research supervisors are not as committed to students' professional development as they are to their own careers. She noted that research supervisors seemed to be very dedicated to promoting their own careers, securing tenure-track positions, and progressing from assistant to associate to (full) professorship; however, she did not feel they had the same dedication to promoting doctoral students' future careers. The student argued that students at the doctoral level need to have tangible outcomes to show for their efforts and be recognized for their work since they will be looking for jobs soon. Therefore, creating opportunities for students to engage in conference presentations, publications, and

extracurricular networking should be priorities for research supervisors who wish to engage in educational assistantships:

As doctoral students we are always trying to build our reputation too, it's not just about experiences but things need to be documented, there has to be some proof and that's why we are pushed to publish or attend conferences. So I don't understand why for research assistantships there is often no acknowledgement or that it's so up to the supervisor to acknowledge you or not. (Full-time student with RAships)

As partially illustrated in the previous sections regarding challenges within RAships and relationships with research supervisors, some full-time students did not consider their RAships ethical. From the conversations with students, it was evident that the ethical element depended greatly on research supervisors. According to full-time students, the ethical aspect was influenced by two main factors: (a) how the supervisors treated RAs, and (b) how much time and effort the supervisors were willing to invest in making the RAships beneficial for RAs.

Two students felt that lack of recognition for their contributions represented an unethical practice in their RAships. Both students were disappointed that research supervisors did not include their names on work in which the students made significant contributions (e.g., data analysis and writing). As one full-time student explained, "if I would publish something with you and wouldn't put your name on it that would be considered so wrong but then why it's okay to do that with RAs." Another student added, "just because the position is being paid it seems like you are losing the right to your piece of the intellectual property. It doesn't seem very ethical" (Full-time student with

RAships). Since RAs perform a variety of tasks and contribute intellectually to research studies, it is only fair to give them proper recognition (Benton, 2004). There are different ways of acknowledging RAs' contributions to projects, including at the lower level, a notation in the preface or footnotes, to the highest level of joint authorship (Hutchinson & Moran, 2005). It is important to note that written recognition in the form of publications or presentations not only acknowledges the contributions of students as RAs but also has the potential to enhance their careers (Rossouw & Niemczyk, 2013). However, authorship credit ought to be allocated only when warranted (Strike et al., 2002).

Anderson, Louis, and Earle's (1994) study exploring doctoral students' experiences with misconduct in academic departments revealed that students who collaborated closely with faculty in research projects were frequently exposed to unethical behaviour. Based on the findings, the authors reported that students are unlikely to report unethical instances to institutional authorities for fear of retaliation (p. 342). They also suggested that greater attention should be paid to research communities and their role in fostering future generations of scholars.

In summary, full-time and part-time students expected that educational RAships would allow them to develop research knowledge and skills. With reference to ethical RAships, the students expected fair treatment and recognition for their contributions. Research supervisors expressed similar views regarding educational and ethical assistantships. As per students' lived experiences as RAs, part-time students considered their assistantships as educational and ethical whereas full-time students considered their assistantships educational but not always ethical. Some full-time students reported being treated as equal collaborators and others reported being treated unfairly.

### **Impact of Student Status (and Other Factors) on Research Assistantships**

All doctoral students were asked if and how their status influenced their experiences with RAships. They were also asked if there were any other factors, other than student status, that may have played a role. The responses from full-time and part-time students with RAships were quite different; however, the responses from both full-time and part-time students without RAships aligned to a certain extent.

Full-time students with RAships referred mainly to the advantages of full-time status, whereas part-time RAs voiced concerns and disadvantages associated with their student status and life circumstances. The part-time students' concerns were related to access to rather than experiences within RAships. Full-time students indicated that their status allowed them to fully immerse themselves in doctoral work, to be regularly on campus, to build relationships within a scholarly community, and access RAships. Part-time students commented on their isolation from the university, disconnection from the program, and limited access to RAships.

All full-time students with RAships agreed that being on campus made them visible and increased their educational opportunities. Students indicated that relationships with researchers and reputation within the Faculty influenced their access to RAships. Both factors relate to regular visits on campus. Being around and networking offered them unique opportunities to learn about professors' research interests and current projects, and to find out when potential RA opportunities might become available. Research supervisors and administrators also recognized that regular visits on campus increased students' chances of getting involved in educational assistantships. One administrator emphasized the importance of being visible and building a good reputation

within the department. She also noted that power dynamics, students' skills, and ability to work independently were factors that influenced students' access to and experiences within RAships.

Two full-time students reported that the mandatory limit of 10 hours of work per week constrained their access to RAships. According to these students, they would be interested in and capable of undertaking more assistantships. They strongly believed that they should be able to decide the number of hours they could work during their programs. Their argument relates to a comment from one research supervisor regarding the need for flexibility: "If they are working with a supervisor that is in their area then they would probably benefit to work 20 hours per week. I think there should be some flexibility with the hours" (Research supervisor).

As reported earlier, one of the part-time students believed that there is not much difference between full- and part-time studies, yet funding support and preferential treatment (including access to RAships) is dedicated to full-time students. The student further explained that the unfair treatment of part-time students led her to feel isolated and excluded from opportunities and benefits granted to full-time students.

Another part-time student also said she felt isolated and not able to take advantage of some opportunities because of her infrequent presence on campus. As the student phrased it, "proximity and flexibility in timing" are the two factors that made her feel disconnected from the program and limited her RAship opportunities. In further conversations, the student also indicated that her full-time work hours and family life with children created time constraints. These factors influenced how much time she dedicated to her doctoral studies and other associated opportunities. For instance, she



recognized that she may have been unaware of the formal recruitment process of RAs because she was unable to attend the information sessions about RAships. As she explained, the sessions were offered during her full-time job hours and did not allow students to join via remote access technologies.

Doctoral students without RA experience also described how their academic status (and other factors) influenced their access to RAships. I was interested to discover factors that affected their decisions not to undertake RAships or identify reasons for their lack of RAship opportunities. The responses from the four full-time students without RAships were divided between (a) those who reported that they were not interested in RAships because of the demanding full-time studies workload and preference to engage in teaching, and (b) those who were looking for RAship opportunities but were not able to secure them due to ineffective advertisement of RA positions. The majority of part-time students without RAships reported feeling isolated from the program and research community and lacking practical research experiences. All three part-time students called for RAship opportunities for students located far away from the university. In terms of other factors, full-time students reported family financial situations as a factor contributing to the level of urgency in accessing RAships; some students had stable financial situations whereas other students relied on on-campus employment to support their families. Part-time students identified their full-time employment and distant locations as factors limiting their presence on campus. Full-time and part-time students alike indicated that family obligations—specifically parenting duties for young children—reduced the time they had available to engage in RAships.

Some full-time students were concerned with finding the time to take on RAships. As one student pointed out, “I’m full time, so I’m qualified to accept an RAship, but I chose not to because yes, I already felt like I had a lot to do as a full-time student [in terms of] my own research and teaching).” Other students emphasized the demanding workload of the program, but indicated they had sought opportunities to become RAs. Administrators also recognized the influence of the demanding workload in the program.

One full-time student with RAships and one full-time student without RA experience recognized the positive impact of full-time status in terms of becoming aware and having the flexibility to take advantage of RAship opportunities available on campus:

Being visible matters because I know that there are number of professors in the program that know me more than they know part-time students that are in my cohort. Because I’m here and I went to many workshops and sessions last year so then you start to become known. The advantage that I have over part-time students is the flexibility I have during the day. I stay busy with the things that I’m working on but if a research assistantship would have been available let’s say between 9 a.m. and 3 p.m. I could access that. Meanwhile many part-timers would not simply because during that time they are doing their regular job. (Full-time student without RAships)

Two part-time students reported feeling isolated from the program and assistantships. They also connected their distant locations with the lack of opportunities to engage in the research community on campus, including RAship opportunities. As one student explained, “the fact that I’m located far away from university definitely influenced [access to RAships] because there were so few opportunities to do the work by

distance” (Part-time student without RAships). One of the three part-time students without RAships reported that her part-time status did not make her feel isolated from the university because she felt supported by her supervisor and doctoral colleagues. However, as with the other two part-time students, she noted there were few RA opportunities for students in distant locations. She indicated that one of the reasons she decided to participate in this study was to bring her concerns to the attention of administrators who in turn might make RAships more inclusive for students located far from the campus.

One of students added that studying part time in a distant location made her less aware of the educational opportunities available at the university. She indicated that she missed seminars offered to graduate students, including information sessions about RAships. One of the administrators also recognized limitations associated with distant locations. She pointed out that part-time students’ access to RAships may be restricted if they were not on campus regularly. However, she suggested that some work could be done from home and communication could be maintained through technology.

Full-time and part-time students without RAships identified other factors that influenced their access to RAships. For full-time students, family financial situation was reported as a factor contributing to the level of students’ urgency in accessing RAships. Two students explained that their comfortable financial situations removed the pressure to seek employment, whereas one full-time student relied on the income from assistantships in order to support his family. The latter student actively looked for employment opportunities on campus and engaged in whatever educational opportunities became available.

One full-time student without an RAship attributed his flexibility to undertake RAships (if one would become available) to his financial freedom and the fact that his children were older. Meanwhile, another student expressed the necessity to maintain a healthy balance between doctoral studies and family life: “They are both important . . . my kids are at home, they are as committed to what I’m doing as I am but I still have to be as committed to them. So the tension is always there” (Full-time student without RAships). His time had to be well managed and divided between the two spheres.

One part-time student specified that even if RAships for distance students became available, it might be challenging for her to engage because of her full-time employment and family obligations. For her, it would depend on the time commitment the RAships would require. She further clarified that she was committed to maintaining balance between work and family life; however, family was always a priority. Therefore, she was well organized to avoid letting her full-time work or her doctoral studies interfere with the quality time she wanted to have with her family.

As is evident in the responses from full-time and part-time students with and without RAships, student status along with life circumstances (financial situation and parental status) influenced their access to or lack of RAships as well as their decisions to take on RAships. It is important to note that the identified “other factors” that influenced students’ experiences with RAships are the same factors that influenced students’ decisions to undertake studies on full-time or part-time bases in the first place. Therefore, it is not surprising that these factors conditioned students’ experiences along with their selected academic status.

Life circumstances of some full-time and part-time students (e.g., necessity to balance multiple roles, time restrictions due to family obligations, and financial responsibility to support family) overlapped significantly. Men and women alike reported domestic and financial responsibilities (3 of 13 doctoral students were males) although those with older children reported more time flexibility in terms of undertaking assistantship opportunities than those with younger children. Pearson et al. (2011) indicated that it is essential to recognize doctoral students as diversely different with multiple identities and priorities that can change over the course of their candidacy. As Pearson et al. explained, viewing doctoral students as diversely different (a) acknowledges their difference without attributing specific group affiliation and (b) recognizes students' multiple roles and unique circumstances. The validity of the authors' argument is reflected in the accounts of doctoral students in this study, who identified their roles and responsibilities beyond the program as factors influencing their experiences. These factors cannot be assigned to any specific academic status. Therefore it is essential to realize that students' life circumstances may come to shape their experiences, access to RAships, and their support needs.

### **Regulations and Practices Specific to Research Assistantships**

Full-time students with RAships reported that some research supervisors shared documents (e.g., research proposal, ethics application, coding scheme, confidentiality form, AERA ethical standards, etc.) that helped them understand the project and their involvement as assistants. The full-time students with RAships could not recall any other documents specific to RAships, except the employment contracts they signed. Full-time students without RAships and all part-time students (with and without RAship

experiences) expressed being unfamiliar with any documents specific to RAships other than employment contracts. However, based on further conversations, several students were aware of regulations such as the 10-hour policy for full-time students and priority for full-time students to work as RAs.

In terms of regulations guiding research supervisors' practices within RAships, two of five researchers expressed relying on specific documents:

I have consulted the faculty of graduate studies document on graduate students in terms of their responsibilities and the rights that they have as well. I have consulted the tri-agency document with respect to graduate student training and some of the experiences they would like students to have as researchers in training. (Research supervisor)

The other research supervisors indicated relying on their past experiences as RAs and allowing their intuition to guide their RAships:

I'm sure there are [documents related to research assistantships] but I'm notorious for being ignorant as I can possibly be for rules and regulations. I tend to follow my instincts and every now and then it gets me into trouble but at large it works . . . I try to treat RAs respectfully and indeed as colleagues and not to exploit their labour and take credit for work they have done. I'm sure there are documents that reflect that approach I couldn't site them by chapter and verse but my instinct is to operate on that. (Research supervisor)

Both administrators reported that there were limited documents related to RAships within the department and the institution. One administrator explained that some policies informed practice within RAships but they were not specific to assistantships and

were scattered all over the place. Administrators' voices echo the literature related to existing policies and procedures pertaining to RAships. Ratković, Niemczyk, Trudeau, and McGinn's (2013) review of major educational databases and website searches of 22 public universities in Ontario found only a small number of publications specific to RAships; only two universities had handbooks specifically for graduate assistants, and institutional websites provided significantly more information about course work and teaching assistantships than RAships. Edwards' (2009) study of RAships at Simon Fraser University also reported that there is little substantive information about rules and regulations surrounding RAships.

Several students, including those with multiple RA position, indicated their unawareness of how RAships were organized and formally distributed. To that end, several full-time and part-time students called for regulations specific to RAships. The students recognized that not everyone had opportunities to secure RA positions and voiced the need for transparent and fair distribution of RAships. As indicated by one full-time student, the opportunities should be advertised to all students:

I don't even know what are the regulations outlined by the university regarding research assistantships. I know that often the research assistantships are being offered out of convenience rather than being advertised. When we have conversations in the grad lab, you learn that there are research assistantships in process that you never even heard about them. They were never advertised so how these students got the positions. It seems like favouritism . . . but is it about having effective assistants or providing learning opportunities because if it's

about learning then everyone should have a chance since we all pay the same tuition. (Full-time student with RAships)

Part-time students without RAships called for regulation that would make RAships more accessible for part-time students located far away from campus. As clarified by one student, with the technology available there are no reasons to exclude students who are not on campus regularly.

The full-time students and part-time student with RAships called for clear understanding of what assistantships should deliver. Many students voiced their unawareness of roles and responsibilities of RAs and research supervisors.

Three of four full-time students with RA experience considered the 10 hour per week regulation as unhelpful. As stated earlier, some of the students believed they should be able to decide how many hours of employment they could take on: “At certain times I think students could probably manage more or they should be able to negotiate that at certain periods in their program” (Full-time student with RAships). One participant expressed a divergent view on the 10 hour per week regulation. The student stated that the 10-hour rule should be applied strenuously, especially at some stages of doctoral studies to limit interference with students’ timely and successful degree completion.

Overall, doctoral students’ responses indicate that the majority was unfamiliar with documents related to RAships (beyond the signed contract of employment). Some students expressed familiarity with the 10 hour per week policy for full-time students, awareness of a formal hiring process, and understanding that priority for RA positions is given to full-time students. Students’ unawareness of documents related to RAships is not surprising since the majority of researchers expressed their unawareness of such



documents and reported relying on their own RA experiences and intuition to guide their practice within RAships. Administrators clarified that there are limited resources that inform practice within RAships. As evident in earlier sections (a) RAships present opportunities and challenges and (b) not all RAships are educational and ethical. Relationships between RAs and research supervisors involve power dynamics that place students in vulnerable positions (Hinchey & Kimmel, 2000; Löfström & Pyhältö, 2012). Therefore, lack of regulations specific to RAships that inform RAs and research supervisors about their roles, rights, and responsibilities would seem to be highly problematic. In case of potential challenges and conflicts, neither party may feel prepared to deal with encountered situations. Formal regulations are essential to safeguard all involved in RAships (Rossouw & Niemczyk, 2013), especially RAs as a vulnerable group (Fogg, 2004; Skorobohacz, 2013).

### **Participants' Recommendations**

The full-time and part-time students provided recommendations about ways to improve access to RAships and enhance assistantships as research learning spaces. The responses from students were complemented by the recommendations from research supervisors and administrators. Many recommendations of full-time and part-time students aligned to a great extent although there were also some unique suggestions. In addition, several recommendations aligned the three groups of participants (students, research supervisors, and administrators), especially when it came to organization and distribution of RAships. The overall recommendations can be divided into three categories: (a) organization and distribution of RAships, (b) establishment of an RA community, and (c) regulations regarding roles and responsibilities within RAships. In

regards to organization and distribution of RAships, full-time and part-time students called for fair distribution of RA positions in terms of making assistantships accessible to all students, which would require a transparent hiring process. Both student groups believed that everyone should have access to at least one RA experience during their program, regardless of student status. As expressed by one part-time student, every student should have the opportunity to benefit from working with expert researchers within RAships. Some students even proposed making RAships a mandatory component of the program:

I think every single PhD student should have at least one [RAship] and it should be part of their graduation. So it should be a requirement . . . . They can do it part time or whatever but I think it should be a critical component because without that what sort of researcher are you. And to work with other researcher(s) is an excellent opportunity and key to the PhD experience. I think [the program] definitely should have that. (Part-time student with RAships)

Both groups also mentioned a need to implement effective online advertisement of RAship opportunities. As one student pointed out, RAships should be advertised as effectively as teaching assistantships: “I will recommend that there should a better communication regarding RAship opportunities. So somebody needs to be broadcasting constantly the research assistantships . . . same way like teaching positions” (Full-time student with RAships). Students suggested that the positions should be posted online for everyone to know when the researchers are hiring. Currently, students expressed not being clear about how to find out about available RAship opportunities or who was hiring RAs. They believed it should be a transparent process, especially because the funding for

many projects came from grants requiring researchers to provide research training for students. Therefore, they felt fairness necessitated that every student have equal access: “If the money is coming from SSHRC or any other public funding source then every student should have an equal opportunity. It shouldn’t be a question whether or not a professor knows somebody” (Full-time student with RAships). Research supervisors also recommended using technology to advertise RAships.

Part-time students also advocated for RAship opportunities for students who were not regularly present on campus. Students argued that the university should better utilize available technology to inform them about RAships and connect them with RA experiences. All three part-time students without assistantships argued that the location of students should not affect their access to information and learning opportunities, considering the large number and types of conferencing tools currently available. As reported, the effective use of technology has potential to increase students’ connections to a research community and decrease their feeling of isolation:

My recommendation would be that the university needs to make more of an effort to use the technology that is available to connect with students. There were workshops offered to graduate students and some of the topics were interesting to me but for me to drive down for two hours it’s challenging. So if those things could actually be broadcast, webcast and archived I think the university should be doing that. Those things should be available for all sorts of graduate students to tap into. There is no good reason for not doing it. (Part-time student without RAships)

The majority of participants recognized the need for a database of who worked as RAs, for how many hours, and what benefits were provided. Such a tool would facilitate fair distribution of RAships to students. Research supervisors also indicated a need to enhance accessibility to information about RAships and ongoing projects. One research supervisor suggested creating a system that would allow (a) students to find out about research projects upon which researchers are working and potential RAship opportunities and (b) researchers to learn about students looking for RAships. The administrators also recommended creating a database to track RAships within the department:

I think it would be a good idea to do a database. We should have a list of our full-time students and who is doing work for us. Since I sign off on all contracts it should be easy for us to do a database. Sometimes it comes to my attention that people are working too many hours or people are getting not enough hours.

(Administrator)

Although both administrators recognized the value of a searchable database, they also indicated it might not be as practical as anticipated. Researchers might still hire students with the most experience rather than those without RA experiences.

Full-time students with RAships drew attention to the lack of an RA community. The students explained that there was a need for a space where they could engage in conversations with other RAs, share their experiences, ask questions, ask for advice, and learn from each other. It was evident from their responses that they would benefit from the support of and connection with other RAs. One full-time student also indicated the need for a feedback mechanism where students could anonymously report the quality of and satisfaction with their RAships. The student, however, recognized that some students

might be hesitant to utilize the feedback system due to potential consequences.

Several participants pointed out that RAships are not as well organized and recognized as teaching assistantships. Participants suggested making RAships more relevant by (a) recognizing faculty members who are role models in mentoring and training RAs, (b) having different levels of RA positions, and (c) presenting certificate awards to distinguish students' competence as researchers. The recommendation to recognize those who engage in RAships was also echoed by one of the administrators. As indicated in the following quotation, RAs should gain the same recognition and relevance as teaching assistants:

From our side, maybe we could do a better job of attracting graduate students and making RAships more valued and recognized. We used to have different levels of RAship Higher Education Certificate program, three different levels. So we used to have that and then we stopped but I think that developing something like that would be great. We already have TA certificate program but it is housed at the university level. And this initiative for RAs is at the faculty level so for some reason we were not able to get our message out. As you know, with TA certificates the TAs have to attend particular number of workshops to get basic or advanced certificates and there is also a competition for best TAs and there is an award for them as well. So I guess if we could do that for RAs, it would be great.

(Administrator)

Along the lines of recognizing RAs for their contributions to the research projects, a number of full-time students with RAships indicated that the term "research assistant" often did not reflect their involvement in the projects. One student suggested that

“research partner” or “research collaborator” would more accurately position RAs within projects. One of the research supervisors believed the term “research assistant” had a hierarchical connotation, which was not appropriate for students at the doctoral level.

Madden’s (2009) study of research management in United Kingdom higher education drew attention to the employment of post-doctoral students as RAs and the importance of using proper terminology to acknowledge their experience and the contributions they made to research projects. Although Madden was describing post-doctoral researchers, his argument is relevant to doctoral student RAs within this study who recommended use of a different term than “assistant,” which sometimes did not acknowledge the extent to which they contributed to the projects and their maturity as researchers (in comparison to undergraduate and master’s students). On that note, Madden called for recognition of status and acknowledgement of post-doctoral students’ experience and, where appropriate, a shift in terminology. Madden argued that sometimes a shift in terminology is appropriate in order to increase researchers’ awareness of their roles within the university that employs them and that future employers see them as competent researchers. As his study indicated, labels such as “post-docs” or “assistants” do not reflect the experience of independent researchers and prompts inequality in relationships. The same seems to be valid for doctoral student RAs who need to see themselves as collaborators rather than assistants. One full-time student suggested having different levels of RAships because the “terminology used is very important; it impacts how we see and position ourselves” (Full-time student with RAships).

Full-time and part-time students called for formal regulations that would ensure fair distribution of RA positions and guide practice within RAships. Students expressed

the need to clearly define the purpose of RAships and to highlight that they are educational employment opportunities meant to develop students' research knowledge and skills. Students also advocated for making RAships more about learning than promoting professors' research agendas. They felt that restricting assistantships to those who already have the skills to complete the tasks was about promoting the professor's agenda and not about the students' learning.

Students advocated for regulations that would safeguard their vulnerable positions (power dynamics) within assistantships and called for higher accountability from research supervisors to provide research training and professional development opportunities for doctoral RAs. The following comment represents concerns of many students who believed that it should be an expectation and not just wishful thinking that research supervisors provide positive educational experiences:

Considering all of my research assistantships, half of them have been positive and half have been negative. If I look back at these experiences and think about flipping the coin on research assistantship experiences, it may come up as a positive experience or it may come up as a negative experience, so based on my history, there is a 50/50 chance. To me is it worth the risk for 50/50 odds? No, it's really not. We need to get research assistantships to the point where the experiences for all students will be like 90% positive. So we really need more regulations, and more protections for the student. (Full-time student with RAships)

In terms of faculty members' skills to work with RAs, one administrator suggested that some faculty members might need to update their skills (e.g., mentoring skills) to provide

positive RAships to doctoral students. The other administrator suggested more research on RAships to learn how to better support and educate the diversity of RAs.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I presented the overarching case of RAships for doctoral students by exploring similarities and differences within and across the two subcases. The accounts of full-time and part-time doctoral students were complemented by responses from research supervisors and administrators as well as relevant documents. The overarching case was explored in close connection to scholarly literature and the theoretical framework. This case reveals the nature and perceptions of RAships in doctoral education in one program in one field at one Ontario institution at a specific period of time.

In the next, and final, chapter I first discuss experiences of these full-time and part-time students in terms of their access to and experiences within RAships. I then extend from this particular case to a wider discussion of recommendations for practice and theory development as well as suggestions for future research.



## CHAPTER EIGHT: DISCUSSION AND CONTRIBUTIONS

The case in this study is the RAships in doctoral education in one program in one field at one Ontario institution at a specific period of time. This study was designed to explore RAship experiences of full-time and part-time doctoral students. The multiple data sources included interviews with doctoral students, research supervisors, and administrators as well as analysis of relevant documents. The key question was *how do institutional regulations, informal practices, and social relations influence full-time and part-time doctoral students' access to and experiences within research assistantships*. My objective was to draw from interviews and documents to acquire a thorough understanding of the organizational characteristics of RAships (i.e., structures of access, distribution, and coordination of participation) to explore the ways regulations, practices, and relations promote, prevent, or limit full-time and part-time students' legitimate peripheral participation in RAships.

In this chapter, driven by the research question and the findings of this study, I discuss experiences of the full-time and part-time students in terms of their access to and experiences within RAships. The theoretical framework of this study, which is informed by a social practice perspective on learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991), played an important role in analyzing and interpreting data. In fact, *access to and experiences within* RAships, demonstrate the ways the full-time and part-time students' experiences and opportunities for legitimate peripheral participation were influenced by *institutional regulations, informal practices, social relations and students' life circumstances*. The last factor, students' life circumstances, is an emergent consideration based on participants' accounts. *Access to Research Assistantships* includes voices of 13 doctoral students with

and without RA experiences (8 full-time students and 5 part-time students), whereas *Experiences within Research Assistantships* reflects responses from 6 students who worked as RAs (4 full-time students and 2 part-time students). As stated earlier, students' accounts are complemented by the voices of research supervisors and administrators as well as relevant documents.

I conclude this chapter with recommendations for practice indicating changes the program may consider implementing to maximize the potential of RAs and for theory development. Then I provide suggestions how future research could explore doctoral students' experiences with RAs. The findings of this study are meant to inform ways to enhance future access to and practice within RAs as research communities of practice. This study is context specific and limited to one program at an Ontario institution; however, I have provided rich descriptions in the hopes that readers may be able to use this information to judge the extent to which the findings may also inform other programs or institutions where RAs could be considered research learning venues.

### **Access to Research Assistantships**

The findings of this study indicate that life circumstances that influenced the students' choices to enter full-time or part-time studies along with student status as a location within an institutional order (regulated by specific policies and practices) were key factors shaping the students' experiences, relationships, and needs within the program. It was evident from students' accounts that family circumstances in terms of parental status and degree of financial security highly influenced their decisions to enrol in the program on full-time or part-time bases as well as their current experiences within

the program. It is important to consider that students' life circumstances may change over time (Pearson et al., 2011) and that the socio-cultural positioning of doctoral students might be more complex than financial and parental obligations. However, I relied on data doctoral students were willing to share during the interviews.

The data showed that occasionally full-time and part-time students who shared similar life circumstance had collective experiences regarding access to RAships. For instance, full-time and part-time doctoral students with children at home stressed the necessity to maintain balance between their multiple roles. As reported by students, any potential assistantship would need to not interfere with their parental obligations. Both men and women reported domestic and financial responsibilities although those with older children reported more time flexibility in terms of undertaking assistantship opportunities.

The analysis of my participants' responses led to a deeper understanding of RAships but also questioning of their inclusiveness as a community of research practice. Participants recognized several shortcomings in terms of organization and distribution of RAships within the department that contributed to unequal access to RAship opportunities. In fact, some of the reasons why full-time and part-time students did not engage in RAships related to limitations such as a lack of information about RAships, poor advertisement of RA positions, and scarce assistantship opportunities for students located far from campus.

Administrators reported that full-time students had priority to access RAships although part-time students could be hired if full-time students were not available. As they clarified, the intention was to provide financial support to full-time students who did

not have full-time employment. At the same time, the majority of research supervisors expressed not paying close attention to students' status when appointing RAs. The main criteria researchers considered when hiring RAs were students' general research skills, ability to quickly engage in a research project, availability during a specific timeframe, and interest in the research topic. The researchers further looked for students who were responsible, dependable, and well organized. As evident, there was an implementation gap between regulations and the actual hiring practice for RAs. Administrators recognized that they had limited input into professors' decisions about whom to hire to assist with their research projects.

The findings from the study showed that the majority of full-time students and part-time students secured their multiple RAs informally as opposed to following the established formal process. Full-time students reported being contacted in most cases directly by professors, whereas part-time students attributed securing RAship opportunities to being proactive, connecting with professors, and letting them know about their availability to work as RAs. Considering that full-time students are more often on campus and thus more visible to the faculty and staff than part-time students, it seems understandable that they were more frequently approached with assistantship offers than part-time students. It is important to note, however, that the informal hiring practices excluded many students (full-time students and part-time students) from opportunities to participate in RAs. Access to RAship opportunities translates into access to legitimate peripheral participation in a research community. As indicated by Lave and Wenger (1991),

The key to legitimate peripherality is access by newcomers to the community of practice . . . . To become a full member of a community of practice requires access to a wide range of ongoing activity, old-timers, and other members of the community; and to information, resources, and opportunities for participation. (p. 101)

Informal distribution of RAships eliminated for many students the opportunity to apply and be considered for RA positions, which in turn (a) prevented their access to RAships as research learning spaces and (b) limited their chances for legitimate peripheral participation as developing researchers.

The majority of participants recognized advertisement of RA positions as inadequate and indicated a need to enhance accessibility to information about RAships. In order to promote fair access to RAship opportunities for all students, many participants suggested that the university should have an electronic platform for RAs and research supervisors. Creating such a system would allow (a) graduate students to find out about researchers' projects and potential RAships, and (b) researchers to learn about students looking for RAship opportunities. Students suggested that RA positions should be posted online for everyone to know what is available and when the researchers are hiring.

Electronic access to information could also assist part-time students during their residency periods to find RAship opportunities. Administrators indicated that the residency period was meant to offer doctoral students opportunities to work closely with faculty members and to apply theory to practice; however, based on the part-time students' responses not all students seemed to benefit from full-time status during their residency periods. As indicated by one administrator, the program within certain

constraints tries to accommodate and treat part-time students as full-time students during their residency periods. It is not difficult to understand that part-time students who are expected to give up full-time jobs for the duration of their residency periods may expect priority to access all learning opportunities, including research assistantships, during this phase of their studies. In order to accommodate part-time students' expectations, the program may need to know in advance about the exact timing for students' residency periods or even assign the residency period based on professors' availability to work with students. This in turn may demand more compromises from students who would no longer experience the current flexibility the program offers for them to choose a preferred residency period. Any changes in policy and practice should include a careful weighting of the benefits and consequences.

Students were unclear how to find out about available RA opportunities or who was interested in hiring RAs. Recognizing that not everyone has a chance to secure RA positions, students voiced the need for transparent and fair distribution of RAships. They believed distribution should be a transparent process, especially since the funding for many projects came from internal or external grants with expectations that researchers provide research training for students. Therefore, they argued that every student should have equal access to research training. As evident from the literature review, doctoral students, who are the research leaders of tomorrow, develop their identities as researchers by engaging in research communities and doing research. Therefore, they need opportunities to acquire a sense of belonging to scholarly communities (Pyhältö, Stubb, & Lonka, 2009) and to see themselves as researchers (McGinn & Pollon, 2004).

According to the data, the majority of full-time and part-time students without RAships lacked general information about RAships. One full-time student without RA experience did not receive any information about available RAships and for two consecutive years undertook employment not of his interest in order not to lose any of the doctoral funding. As explained in Chapter Four, full-time students took on employment out of institutional obligation because they were required to work for the university to maximize their doctoral funding. As findings demonstrate, for many students working while studying was a necessity in order to support their studies and provide income for their families. Hinchey and Kimmel (2000) noted that “the more a student needs money, the less choice he or she has about work conditions” (p. 67).

The stories of several part-time students portrayed structural limitations that imposed barriers to accessing RAships. The accounts from part-time students revealed their feelings of isolation and exclusion from access to information about RAships due to their full-time employment, family obligations, and often-distant locations. Students’ stories aligned with the literature reporting that part-time doctoral students are often disengaged from the learning community, sitting on the periphery and in isolation (Neumann & Rodwell 2009; Sanders, 2012). It is not surprising that part-time students in this study identified a desire to connect with colleagues and a learning community as main reasons for engaging in RAships. To ameliorate feelings of isolation, they called for flexible hours for workshops and information sessions as well as more effective use of technology. As indicated by part-time students, the majority of activities took place during the weekday when they could not attend and remote conferencing and presenting were not available. Part-time students without RAship experiences called for regulations

that would make RAships more accessible for part-time students located far away from the campus. Considering existing technology and conferencing tools available these days, there is no evident reason to limit students' access to information and research learning opportunities. More effective use of technology has the potential to increase students' connections to a research community and decrease their feelings of isolation.

Another practice that prevented many students from legitimate peripheral participation through RAships relates to hiring students with existing research skills over those with less research experience. Many full-time students and administrators recognized that students were hired as RAs based on the skills they brought to the project. Some research supervisors also admitted to this practice. Students emphasized that those with skills had a higher chance of getting positions over those who needed research training. There is no question that research supervisors work with strict deadlines and often have limited funding, which may result in temptations to hire students with existing research skills to assist with their projects. The research tasks must be completed in a timely fashion, which is much more feasible if an appointed RA already has the requisite skills. However, it is important to recognize that such practices exclude an ample group of students from access to educational opportunities. Supporting legitimate peripheral participation of all doctoral students as developing researchers implies granting them access to RAships as research learning spaces. Limiting access to those who already possess necessary skills to engage in RAships marginalizes students eager to acquire research skills and become part of a research community.

It is also important to consider if existing skills should or could be used as criteria for recruiting students as RAs and if so what are the implications. Does the program's



accepted practice of prioritizing students with existing research skills for RA appointments assume that all students enrolled in the doctoral program have such skills? Does the program consider and assess those research skills during the admissions process? These questions need answers in order to evaluate the appropriateness of the existing hiring practices. In case the program enrolls doctoral students with diverse levels of research skills then the program needs to consider if they are using the right admission criteria. There is also a need to establish if the program is intended to be exclusive to students with existing research skills or to include the acquisition of research knowledge and skills as an outcome of the program that students are expected to achieve through proper research training. If the latter, then it is essential for the program to assist students in terms of resources and educational opportunities to assure their development as researchers. Ultimately, the program needs to decide on one option and be consistent in terms of their practices. If research supervisors expect students to have research skills but the program admits students without these skills, then the program is inconsistent in terms of their own expectations and continuing tensions must be expected.

Accepting the practice of hiring students with existing skills over those that need research training has profound implications. First, it contradicts the institutional claims that RAships serve graduate students to learn research knowledge and skills. In that regard, Hinchey and Kimmel (2000) urge institutions to reveal if “graduate students are novices who need assistantships to learn professional skills, or they are skilled scholars contributing immeasurably to the work of university” (p. 7). To that end, doctoral students are already questioning the purpose of RAships. Findings illustrated that students questioned (a) whether RAships were spaces to learn research or practice

existing research skills, and (b) why would someone with research skills even consider becoming an RA. All these points seem to represent legitimate questions considering mixed messages students receive and observe regarding RAships. Second, limiting RAships to students with existing research skills means supporting the circulation of research knowledge and skills within the same privileged group of students. As one full-time student with RA experiences explained, “it’s the same old catch 22, how are you supposed to get experience if you can’t get a job and you can’t get a job without experience.” To promote the circulation of research knowledge and skills would require researchers to ensure equity in the appointment of RAs. Researchers should consider students’ competence as potential RAs with adequate research training as opposed to students’ existing research competence (McGinn et al., 2013). Moreover, consideration should be given to the benefits RAships can provide to students rather than the extra time and challenges involved in training RAs (Strike et al., 2002).

With respect to fair distribution of RAships, the findings indicated that the absence of a database storing information regarding assistantships further exacerbates the problem. The majority of participants recognized the need for a database that would record the names of those hired as RAs, their research supervisors, the point within their studies when they were hired, and the length of their contracts. Creating an electronic record could identify students without assistantships and grant them hiring priority when RA opportunities become available. In practice, such a searchable database can only serve its purpose if researchers respect fair distribution practices. Otherwise, as recognized by the administrators, even with the database in place, researchers might hire those with existing skills rather than provide opportunities to those with less experience.

Overall, the findings demonstrated several practices and regulations that prevented or limited students' legitimate peripheral participation through RAships. It is important to note, however, that students' life circumstances and students' status conditioned them to follow specific policies and practices. Therefore it is fair to conclude that all these elements were closely interconnected.

It is clear that attention needs to be paid to institutional structural issues that mediate organizational processes and relationships between RAs and research supervisors. RA recruitment processes need to be fair, transparent, and compliant with institutional regulations. Explicit regulations need to inform research supervisors how to reach potential RAs, what procedures to follow to recruit them, and what criteria to consider when selecting candidates. Although students with existing research skills may contribute to project completion with minimal guidance, students without RAship experience may benefit the most in terms of acquiring research skills and identifying themselves as members of a research community. In addition, lack of accessibility to information regarding RAships limits doctoral students' access to RAships. Therefore, enhancing existing structures of access and upgrading to provide virtual access to information may ameliorate some of the current limitations to students' engagement in RAships.

The data also indicate a need for regulations more inclusive of part-time students who, just as full-time students, wish to participate in research practice and gradually become full participants in a research community. As noted earlier, the program places substantial focus on increasing doctoral students' foundational knowledge and research skills throughout the coursework (program document, 2013). In addition, as specified

within the program document (2013), part-time students undertake two consecutive terms of residency in order to be present on campus, participate in the university's functions, connect with the research community, and assist faculty members with their research. Although the commitment to make the program inclusive for part-time students is visible, the question remains how could RAships become more open to part-time students? One option to consider would be to provide part-time students priority to work as RAs during their residency periods. Full-time students are given such priority during every term due to their status, therefore, part-time students could be granted priority over full-time students during their residency periods. Another option, which aligns with some students' suggestions to make RAships a mandatory part of the program, would be to grant a specific number of mandatory RA hours for all students (full time or part time). The set number of hours would need to be reasonable for part-time students to complete during their residency periods. Full-time students would have a longer period of time in which to cover this same set number of hours. This approach would allow all students to have at least one RAship experience within the program. As explained in Chapter Four, the main funding package for full-time students includes an optional graduate assistantship that requires students to work (approximately \$7,200 annually). This graduate assistantship (or part of it) could be allocated to doctoral students from the beginning (i.e., at the outset of the program for full-time students and the outset of the residency period for part-time students) with the condition that students find research supervisors. It is reasonable to assume that most faculty members would welcome the assistance of doctoral students with their research projects, especially if they do not need to worry about securing additional funds. In addition, students could apply for extra RAship positions according

to their availability, progress within the program, and availability of extra positions (i.e., any student with an RA-allotment would have priority over those who have used up their allotments).

### **Experiences Within Research Assistantships**

The findings indicate that the full-time and part-time students' experiences within RAships highly depended on their research supervisors' commitments to provide educational and ethical RAship experiences. According to the full-time students, the quality of the experiences depended on how the supervisors treated RAs and how much time and effort they were willing to invest in making the RAships beneficial for assistants. One administrator explained, "the ethical part is the hard part. There are power differentials and faculty members are their own unique individuals so some are easier to work with than others." Based upon the students' stories, working relationships between research supervisors and RAs influenced students' engagement in the experience and their perceptions about their membership within a research community. In fact, some dynamics within RAships promoted and others prevented or limited students' legitimate peripheral participation and the development of their identities as researchers. A lack of regulations informing RAs and research supervisors about their roles, rights, and responsibilities might be problematic. Data showed that the majority of doctoral students were unfamiliar with documents related to RAships, which is not surprising since administrators reported the existence of limited sources that could inform practice within RAships. The few existing resources are scattered across various documents and thus are not easily known or located. In addition, the majority of research supervisors reported relying on their intuition and their own experiences as RAs to guide their practice within

assistantships. The reliance on intuition and one's own past experiences can, however, be problematic sometimes. Diamond (2010) described his journey in learning to mentor and be co-mentored. Diamond indicated that attempts to mentor can be problematic when grounded in the mentor's own past negative experiences. He encouraged educators and researchers to reflect on their personal experiences of mentorship and to explore other and richer forms of mentoring since there is always more than one way to mentor. This suggestion regarding exploring diverse mentoring practices implies a potential need for universities to provide such professional development spaces for research supervisors.

According to the data, full-time and part-time doctoral students who worked as RAs had multiple RAships and five out of six students had opportunities to be involved in at least one longer RAship contract (1–2 years instead of the usual 40–80 hours in a single term). The majority of students expressed valuing longer RAships over short-term contracts because longer contracts allowed them to engage in diverse research tasks and activities, although not necessarily in the entire research cycle. It is important to recognize that the duration of an RAship often dictated how much exposure students received to the research process. Yet, limited funding often did not provide sufficient money to hire RAs for extended periods of time.

The data showed that students' engagement in advanced tasks such as crafting a grant application, collecting data, or co-writing a research paper promoted their perceptions that they were research partners and belonged to a research community. The scholarly literature demonstrates that students' engagement in meaningful research tasks contributes to their identity formation as competent researchers (Grundy, 2004; McGinn et al., 2013; Niemczyk, 2010). However, it was also evident from the data that shorter

contracts could also be educational and provide space for students to acquire transferable skills essential for doctoral students' future careers (CAGS, 2008; M. Rose, 2012).

Lave and Wenger (1991) explained that some members are more central than others in communities of practice; newcomers occupy more peripheral yet legitimate positions in the community since they have not yet mastered all practices of the community. In RAships, research supervisors are highly skilled practitioners who occupy central places whereas doctoral student RAs are less central since they are developing knowledge and skills required for full membership. Findings of this study revealed that students' participation in RAships and engagement in authentic research tasks promoted their transition towards full participation in a research community.

The findings of this study illustrated that full-time and part-time students credited the development of their identities as researchers to participation in some larger research community (e.g., participating in a conference, attending a writing retreat). This again provides testimony to the value of legitimate peripheral participation as a process by which RAs participate in the actual practice of researchers, engage in a community of practice, and eventually become full participants. In educational RAships, an RA does not remain on the periphery for long because the student is drawn further into the community of practice, encouraged to practice research in order to move from being a novice to becoming a competent researcher. This development might be challenging to achieve during shorter RAship contracts; however, as one of the researchers indicated even 40 hours or 80 hours funding contributes to students' development as researchers and helps advance projects.

Based on the data, the development of researcher identities emerged from the co-participation of novices with experts and engagement in a research community. Pyhäntö et al. (2009) claimed that doctoral students developed their identities as researchers by engaging in research communities and doing research. However, to do so, they needed opportunities to acquire a sense of belonging to research communities. This sense of belonging can be prevented when students' collaborative participation is limited. In fact, some students articulated that engaging in solitary and independent RA work, sporadic meetings with research supervisors, and limited or no contact with other team members made them feel overwhelmed with assigned tasks and disconnected from the projects. As stated earlier, the learning process under the conditions of legitimate peripheral participation (Lave and Wenger, 1991) relied on interactive involvement where the novice (that is, the RA) performed tasks and activities and observed the practice of an expert (the research supervisor). Solitary work of students with marginal collaborative engagement in research and limited connection to research members significantly limited the potential of these learning experiences.

Several students reported that the nature of their relationships with research supervisors, including the support and mentorship they received, influenced their sense of belonging within the assistantships and their perceptions of power dynamics. Garrett (1997, p. 228) explained that supervisors "set the tone" of relationships and have the ability to maximize or minimize students' feelings of power or powerlessness. The findings of this study indicate that doctoral students who experienced mentorship and dedication from research supervisors toward their development as researchers felt that they were colleagues and valued collaborators. A supportive learning environment was



conductive to recognition of students' membership within RAships and development of their identities as researchers. As articulated by Lee and Roth (2003), "becoming more fully engaged and becoming an expert are two sides of the same coin" (para. 11).

Unfortunately, not all the findings reflect positive collaborations. Two full-time students reported struggling with their research supervisors' personalities and their hierarchical attitudes towards students. These doctoral students felt that their supervisors did not treat them as collaborators and were not interested in mentoring. According to these students, the researchers were only concerned with getting the work done and moving their projects forward. Deem and Brehony (2000) argued that academic pressures experienced by researchers leave little time for supervision of research students and some supervisors may transfer their workload pressures onto their doctoral students. This argument was echoed by the majority of research supervisors and both administrators within this study, all of whom recognized high academic demands on faculty members as factors influencing their level of participation in students' research training. Although faculty workload pressures and competing demands for their time are undeniable, research supervisors have the responsibility to support and actively enhance development of students as future researchers, while simultaneously ensuring that their project objectives are achieved (Rossouw & Niemczyk, 2013). It is important to note that engagement in mentorship has the potential to deliver benefits for not only RAs but also research supervisors. Besides personal satisfaction and fulfilment of academic obligations, supervising RAs provides space for researchers to think more comprehensively about research education and to reflect on their own mentoring practices (McGinn et al., 2013). As one of the administrators explained, the role of a

researcher is very large and there are lots of skills that faculty members need to have in order to assist students. Sometimes, faculty members may need to update their skills (e.g., mentoring skills) in order to provide positive RAship experiences for doctoral students. The question that remains is if this is (a) an institutional responsibility, (b) an individual faculty member's responsibility, or (c) a shared responsibility.

Another aspect students struggled with was a lack of recognition for their contributions to the projects. Two full-time students expressed frustration about not being fairly recognized for their work although they performed advanced tasks and contributed significantly to the projects. The full-time students argued that especially at the doctoral level it should be clear that students need tangible recognition since soon they will be looking for jobs. This argument about being recognized connects to a statement made by one of the research supervisors regarding publishing with RAs: "I think that research assistantship relationship should be quantifiable for a student and able to be reproduced for example on their CV as a real contribution as opposed to a support role." It is understandable that not all RAships can offer publication or conference presentation opportunities, which is a significant recognition students may receive for their contributions and potentially may enhance their careers. However, it is only fair that research supervisors consider other ways of giving students proper recognition for their contributions (Benton, 2004). Research supervisors may consider acknowledging students' input in future publications, including students in future conferences and workshops, assisting students with their doctoral research, helping students to apply for funding opportunities, providing recommendation letters, or recommending students for other assistantships. It is also important to consider that students who are not

appropriately recognized for their contributions may get discouraged from future participation in RAships and may discourage other students from participating. Experiencing lack of reciprocity may also diminish students' sense of belonging within a research community or reduce their interest in research at large. When RAs see their personal contributions to research development, RAships can become transformational, allowing the assistants to learn research skills and practices, enhance their self-confidence, and envision themselves as members of a research community (Grundy, 2004). One could argue that not recognizing students' contributions is an unethical practice that translates into accepting exploitation of students' work as a norm. Often, students do not want to jeopardize their doctoral studies and thus do not feel they are in positions to question existing power dynamics and therefore they may accept a lack of reciprocity within their RAships.

Acceptance of existing power dynamics is also visible in students' intimidation to report challenges and conflicts encountered within RAships. Several students expressed feeling hesitant to report practices that they perceived to be unfair to their research supervisors or to anyone else. They were concerned that reporting any conflicts could potentially affect their relationships with research supervisors, their future employment on campus, their reputations within the department, and potentially completion of their degrees. The following quotation from a full-time student reflects students' vulnerable positions, which often result in students' silent acceptance of unfair practices:

You can't voice anything to anyone because you don't know who is connected to whom and if you want to stay in this university you probably don't want to burn any bridges. And the PhD is very long so you are surrounded by the same people

for a very long time. So regardless of your experience, I feel that there is really no one you can voice that, even reporting that to a Chair of the program is not an option because at the end of the day you are a student and they are all colleagues. So you can't say anything to them.

The findings show that doctoral student RAs felt themselves to be in vulnerable positions when relationships with research supervisors were overpowering, even more so when research supervisors were also students' course instructors or doctoral advisors. The nature of the relationships that some of the full-time students described portrayed power dynamics, which in combination with multiple student-employee roles increased the pressure to perform tasks and introduced hesitation to voice potential concerns. To that end, several participants from all three groups (doctoral students, research supervisors, and administrators) recognized the existence of power dynamics within RAships. One of the researchers explained that it may take time to establish relationships where students see themselves as partners rather than subordinates. Meanwhile another research supervisor expressed making sure at the outset of every assistantship that students understood they were working for the project and not for her. These findings are consistent with the literature indicating that graduate students employed at the university where they also study may experience power dynamics and find themselves in vulnerable positions (Skorobohacz, 2013). RAs may feel pressure to accommodate all requirements of their research supervisors and not voice their concerns since they depend on researchers for potential future research experiences, positive letters of recommendation, and grades (Naufel & Beike, 2013; Sanders, 2012). As one administrator explained,

It can work well or it can be too much reliance on one person. At the end of the day they write your reference letter and they make comments about you if someone is looking for an RA or TA . . . you have to be careful because those are things that are never said but they can influence how things are. It's always true in the workplace but it's even more when you are vulnerable in that regard because you count on good will.

Therefore, it is essential that research supervisors recognize that their collaboration with students is inherently unequal (Fine & Kurdek, 1993; Manathunga, 2007) and consider how their actions may affect RAs' vulnerable positions. As suggested by Teeuwssen et al. (2012), "An openness about expectations from the very beginning and negotiation of meaningful roles and responsibilities can help alleviate but not eliminate power differentials" (p. 692). Research supervisors have an important responsibility to facilitate the development of students' evolving identities as independent researchers, which comes with the additional responsibility to lead by example and avoid exploitative practices.

These findings point to the necessity for regulations to guide practices within RAships and to safeguard RAs as a vulnerable group (Fogg, 2004; Rossouw & Niemczyk, 2013). It is evident that students' relationships with their research supervisors influenced their experiences as RAs. It is also evident that practices employed by the research supervisors can to some extent be credited to limited regulations that could inform RAs about their roles, rights, and responsibilities. Meanwhile, research supervisors' responses indicate that they often relied on personal experiences as RAs and intuition to guide their practice within assistantships. Full-time students and part-time students emphasized the need for regulations that clearly defined the purpose of RAships

as educational employment opportunities meant to develop students' research knowledge and skills. Doctoral students also advocated for higher accountability from research supervisors to provide research training and professional development opportunities for RAs.

### **Key Considerations**

As evident in the results of this study, access to RAships was influenced by students' status, students' life circumstances, and the organization and distribution of assistantships. Students' experiences within RAships were highly dependent on research supervisors' practices and commitments to provide educational and ethical RAship experiences. I began this study with the intention to pay special attention to institutional regulations, informal practices, and social relations as factors influencing students' experiences within RAships. However, I have learned through this study that students' life circumstances are essential to consider as additional factors that influence students' experiences. I also learned that the institutional regulations, informal practices, social relations, and students' life circumstances not only influenced students' access to and experiences within assistantships but also were closely interrelated. For instance, students' life circumstances affected their decisions to study full time or part time and thus placed them in a specific social order within the institution. The specific location in which they were placed conditioned them through specific practices and regulations. Limited regulations about roles, rights, and responsibilities for RAs and research supervisors influenced relationships between students and their supervisors. As argued by Teeuwssen et al. (2012, p. 692), the relationship between supervisors and doctoral students is governed by institutional policy frameworks. To that end, attention needs to be paid to

students' life circumstances in order to enhance existing practices and to create regulations specific to RAships. Regulations are an aspect of social relations that affects institutional processes by organizing and regulating social practices and relationships (Smith, 1990). Informed practices and regulation may limit institutions' structural issues (e.g., informational barriers) and improve relationships between students and their supervisors and thus maximize students' experiences within assistantships.

Influenced by the literature review (e.g., Bates & Goff, 2012; Neumann & Rodwell, 2009; Sanders, 2012; Teeuwsen et al., 2012), at the outset of this study, I anticipated that part-time students would be the ones who would find themselves in vulnerable and peripheral positions; however, students' access to and experiences within assistantships showed that full-time and part-time students were sometimes placed in vulnerable and peripheral positions. Full-time and part-time students identified practices and supervisory behaviours that made them feel excluded, unrecognized, unappreciated, and as merely assistants rather than collaborators or partners. As Lee and Roth (2003) argued, identity is not experienced by an individual as a detached entity, but as a set of emotions. Although it is highly difficult to eliminate or limit institutional assumptions and power relations on which deferential treatment of students occurs, this study made full-time and part-time students' experiences and challenges within RAships transparent.

The findings provided not only deeper understanding of the RAship experiences of full-time students and part-time students but also understanding of what kinds of social engagements and practices provided the right context for research learning to occur within RAships. Relying on students' stories, the evidence suggests that the right context for educational and ethical RAships is inclusive, supportive, collaborative, and attentive

to students' individual needs, and hence relies heavily on their life circumstances. Students' voices outlined different needs and concerns regarding access to and experiences within RAships.

The statement about the right context for educational and ethical RAships raises a question if all assistantships have the potential to be educational and ethical. As clarified earlier, educational RAships refer to assistantships that provide space for students to increase their research knowledge and skills, discover responsibilities associated with being researchers, and develop identities as researchers. Meanwhile, ethical RAships refer to RAships that are educational and emphasize respect, reciprocity, and fair treatment of doctoral students hired as RAs. In this study, special attention is given to fairness and recognition of RAs' work due to power imbalances within the relationships between doctoral RAs and their research supervisors. Considering these descriptions, it seems logical to assume (especially within educational institutions) that every assistantship, regardless of its duration, has the potential to increase students' research knowledge, be inclusive and collaborative, and operate on the ground of respect and reciprocity. Some challenges may surface with accommodating students' individual needs, however, with mutual commitment from RAs and research supervisors to RAships, conscious efforts can be made to accommodate given circumstances.

In addition, this study sheds light on practices and conditions that promoted, prevented, or limited students' legitimate peripheral participation through RAships. The following sections offer recommendations for practice and theory development as well as suggestions for future research.



### **Recommendations for Practice Development**

The findings of this study, especially participants' recommendations suggest a number of worthwhile recommendations for practice development. The recommendations provided by full-time and part-time students aligned significantly. In addition, recommendations pertaining to the organization and distribution of RAships aligned across the three groups of participants (students, research supervisors, and administrators). The main recommendations referred to the following three categories: organization and distribution of RAships, establishment of an RA community, and regulations regarding roles and responsibilities within RAships.

In Chapters Five, Six, and Seven, I clearly outlined all the recommendations from the participants. In this section, I highlight the specific recommendations that have the greatest potential to be actionable. My intention is to provide recommendations for practice development but also to critically assess their complexities. As evident in the following text, responsibly acting upon some of these recommendations might necessitate additional assessment in future research studies across diverse institutional contexts.

The present study raised many challenges pertaining to the lack of electronic access to information about RAships and the need for recruitment processes that are fair, transparent, and compliant with institutional regulations. As indicated by all three groups of participants, it would be effective to create a virtual space where all students can access information about RAships and potential RA positions. A website dedicated to RAships could benefit not only students but also researchers looking to recruit RAs. In addition to providing such an electronic platform, the general information about RAships could be introduced to students during courses early in the program. Since this doctoral

program is a research-oriented degree, there might be opportunities to align learning about RAships within research education courses.

As per students' suggestions, it would be useful to establish an online RAship community that would allow (a) students to share information, ask questions, and inquire about opportunities and (b) researchers to post information about their current research projects or place calls for RAs. The online RAship community could support a system for students and a rich source of information for everyone involved or interested in RAships. Several students stated that their doctoral journeys might be quite independent thus they needed educational spaces that allowed them to connect with and feel part of a research community.

The next recommendation supported by all three groups of participants refers to setting up an electronic database as a first step to creating a fair and transparent recruitment process. Several participants suggested creating an electronic database for RAships. Entering information from the contracts created for RAs could be a great start. Recording information in a database would allow tracking of who is being hired, for how long, and what research training is provided. Creating such a database would require identifying a person in charge of maintaining the records on a regular basis, which may add additional workload for an administrative assistant. However, having such information easily accessible has the potential to facilitate equitable distribution of assistantship opportunities to students and promote higher levels of accountability in terms of benefits RAships deliver to students.

The organization, distribution, and management of RAships dictate students' access to participation. Therefore, it is important for administrators and individual

research supervisors to make commitments to create and comply with organizational structures that support rather than subvert the functionality and effectiveness of RAships as a research community of practice. Such commitments along with maintaining systems of accountability are essential in order to provide social and educational equity (Hinchey & Kimmel, 2000).

Some students (full time and part time) called for making RAships a mandatory component of the program. This suggestion implies students' recognition of the potential RAships have to serve as research learning venues. However, the possibility of incorporating RAships as a mandatory component of the program needs to be assessed. First, it would be essential to determine how many potential RAs are enrolled in the program in order to evaluate if there are enough RA positions to go around. This would provide understanding to what extent it is feasible to offer RAship experiences to every student. Second, it would be important to establish an appropriate duration for RAships in order to accommodate all students. It is logical to assume that providing a higher number of RAships would decrease the length of individual RAships. This in turn leads to a question to what extent shorter (e.g., 20 hours) RAships would benefit students and enhance their research skills. McGinn et al. (2013) documented clear development of an RA over 130 hours, but no comparable studies are available for shorter durations.

Institutions and granting agencies encourage RAships as a complement to graduate studies and funding agencies prioritize the development of the next generation of scholars (McGinn et al., 2013; SSHRC, 2014). The question then emerges is the program under investigation doing its job in immersing doctoral students in a research culture and developing the next generation of future researchers? As stated in Chapter

Four, the program supports students' research education thorough qualitative and quantitative research methods courses; research courses allowing students to explore theory and research in relation to their planned dissertations, a comprehensive examination where students demonstrate their research skills completing authentic academic tasks, and dissertation research under the supervision of their doctoral committees. Further, doctoral students are encouraged to engage in graduate assistantships and collaborate with researchers and colleagues. Findings of this study indicate that although RAships have the potential to complement other research training spaces, it seems that there is little reflection about how they occur and function. Lack of regulations and access limitations associated with students' legitimate peripheral participation through RAships indicate that the program needs to devote more attention to enhancing RAships. RAs and research supervisors may find themselves in challenging positions with limited guidelines. Therefore, it is important that the institutions where they work and study ensure that these relationships are successful. Flora (2007) suggested, "Graduate administrators should scan the graduate assistantship legal and cultural environment to seek positive and appropriate changes where needed in administering, supervising and monitoring the graduate assistantship process" (p. 320).

As was evident from the voices of participants from all three groups, there is also an explicit need for regulations guiding practice within RAships and safeguarding RAs as a vulnerable group (Fogg, 2004; Rossouw & Niemczyk, 2013). Participation within RAships depends also on regulations (or lack of regulations as evident in the study) that affect experiences within RAships. The findings show that research supervisors played an important role in students' perceptions of belonging to a research community and their

development as researchers. While many stories revealed research supervisors' commitments to mentorship and the professional development of students (Jiao, Kumar, Billot, & Smith, 2011), some relationships seemed to involve exploitative practices and misuses of power (Grundy, 2004; Hinchey & Kimmel, 2000). It seems logical to conclude that to a certain degree, research supervisors control the experiences of RAs and thus have the power to facilitate or limit students' participation in research communities and their development as researchers.

In order to maximize students' experiences within RAships, research supervisors need to commit to mentoring students and providing research training. As evident from participants' accounts, sometimes RA experiences are reduced to task completion and irregular meetings between an RA and a research supervisor. As indicated by one administrator, researchers may need to refresh and expand their mentorship skills. Therefore, it would be useful if the program could introduce workshops or other training resources for research supervisors about how to enhance their mentoring and research training practices. Workshop organizers would need to take into account the busy schedules of academics and try to be creative in terms of workshop delivery. One possibility would be to video record the sessions and made them accessible online.

I direct these recommendations for practice development to the committees responsible for academic programming and encourage them to make decisions that align with the goals for their program. Program committees need to reflect upon the quality assurance procedures and their responsibilities to assess the extent to which the program is meeting the standards. In order to introduce accountability within the program for the success of RAships, the evaluation of these research education spaces could be

incorporated into Internal Quality Assurance Program reviews. There is no reason to limit these reviews to required program components and ignore co-curricular opportunities such as RAships. It would be important to evaluate RAships, which have potential to be of great value to fulfilling the promise of the program to educate graduates who can contribute to research and scholarship in Canada and internationally.

### **Recommendations for Theory Development**

As stated in Chapter One, the theoretical framework I selected for this study is informed by a social practice perspective on learning. Lave and Wenger (1991) argued that learning is a process of participation in communities of practice, emphasized the whole person, and situated learning in certain forms of social participation. The authors described legitimate peripheral participation as a particular way of engagement through which newcomers become part of a community of practice and eventually become full participants. Considering legitimate peripheral participation in my study implied looking at RAships as potential educational spaces where doctoral students under the supervision of competent researchers could grow as independent researchers.

I found this theoretical framework useful and valuable in terms of linking the individual and the collective, making sense of learning as a participatory process, and understanding what kind of context is conducive for learning research. As explained by Lave and Wenger (1991), the communities of practice rely heavily upon mentoring relations. The importance of mentorship and support from research supervisors within RAships was also evident in my study. However, some of the doctoral students working as RAs reported negative experiences, poor mentorship, and unethical practice. In fact, some students indicated learning from their experiences what not to do, which indicates

that attention needs to be paid not only to the learning process but also to the quality and content of learning.

In terms of theoretical development, my study brings forward a new consideration for relying on legitimate peripheral participation as a process by which newcomers participate in the actual practice of experts, engage in a community of practice, and eventually become full participants. Lave and Wenger (1991) explained that learning as an aspect of social practice “involves the whole person; it implies not only a relation to specific activities, but a relation to social communities” (p. 53). The results of the current study align with Lave and Wenger’s argument that learning as an aspect of social practice involves the whole person. However, although Lave and Wenger treated learners as holistic entities, they focused insufficient attention on the influence of external conditions such as students’ life circumstances on practice within social communities. Students’ life circumstances have a significant impact on their access to and experiences within RAships. An important aspect to consider is that for students to become legitimate peripheral participants, they need to gain access to a research community, its members, and resources; however, as the findings of this study illustrate, access to RAships is not equally accessible to all. Part-time students who feel particularly isolated from the institution due to their full-time employment, distant location, and family obligations find it challenging to participate in RAships.

I believe that legitimate peripheral participation offers a starting framework from which to understand and analyze learning processes. However there is a need to consider conditions beyond the actual site of learning (RAships) such as students’ life circumstances to deal with learners as holistic entities.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

No study can answer all that must be discovered about a particular phenomenon. Earlier, I described some of the limitations of the present study and recommended that further studies could be designed to counteract these limitations. The strength of the present study is in its particularity. Further studies are needed to investigate other contexts and settings at similar levels of depth and richness. As well, studies are needed that provide broader based understandings across contexts.

Future research could explore more broadly doctoral students' access to and experiences within RAships across institutions and programs. The present study adds to the knowledge base about the development of research skills through RAships in one doctoral program. The detailed and in-depth exploration of doctoral RAships in Education in the present study has potential to inform the design of survey questions for a larger quantitative study. The rich descriptions from qualitative studies like the present one can provide important context to design survey questions that move beyond surface-level considerations to explore RAship experiences across contexts.

Other studies could also involve different Education doctoral programs across universities for comparison purposes. Assuming that approaches to and experiences within RAships may vary across universities, it would be beneficial to identify the most effective practices and potential regulations that could then serve as a guide for others. For instance, recruitment of RAs may be approached differently across various Education doctoral programs. Comparing recruitment practices could be very informative in terms of adapting the most effective and fair hiring process. The cross-comparison could also be extended to programs beyond Education.



Future research exploring doctoral students' experiences with RAships could extend the findings of the present study by including matching research supervisors with the particular students under investigation. It would be interesting to compare students' and research supervisors' perceptions about shared RAship experiences. Such research could, however, pose confidentiality issues and challenges with reporting experiences in unidentifiable ways.

Other possible research projects could bring closer attention to life circumstances and the socio-cultural positioning of doctoral students. As evident from this study, students' personal lives influenced their choices to undertake full-time or part-time studies, which then positioned them in particular ways within the institutional order and affected the ways they were regulated by specific policies and practices. Exploring thoroughly students' life circumstances and their socio-cultural positioning could uncover different factors that ultimately shape their experiences, relationships, and needs within the program. This in turn could guide the program about what practices and approaches could accommodate students' needs and improve their experiences within the program, including access to RAships.

As is evident from the present findings, limited university budgets to support students' research training and competitive external research grants condition the number and duration of available RAship opportunities. The findings show that students advocate for fair distribution of assistantships to all students, especially those without RA experiences. Making RAships more accessible and inclusive is essential to contradict the idea that higher education systems are designated for the privileged few (Deem & Brehony, 2000). At the same time, students indicated that longer RAships where students

engaged in advanced tasks and a larger research community maximized their development as researchers. Considering that funding is very limited means that involving more students in RAships could require more assistantships for shorter periods of time or acceptance of fewer students to the program. In the case of the former, it would be important to investigate research supervisors' practices and creative ways of engaging in RAships with limited funding and short time periods (e.g., 40–80 hours). Therefore, future research could explore how to make the most of any RAship, keeping at heart the education of future researchers and successful progress of the projects undertaken.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Considering that the culture of the academy has embraced research as its highest value and that comprehensive universities have adopted missions to discover, produce, and share knowledge, it is somewhat surprising that RAships seem to be in the process of development in terms of organization, distribution, satisfaction, and recognition. I hope that results of this study validate the potential of RAships as pedagogical spaces contributing to students' development as researchers and offer quality recommendations to enhance RAships within and beyond the program under investigation. The findings of this research may help students understand access to and practices within RAships, assist academics in fulfilling their ethical obligations to ensure their RAships provide valuable educational experiences for students (Strike et al., 2002), and inform administrators and academic program committees about possible organizational changes to be made.

This research study allowed me to get a sense of the lived experiences of full-time and part-time students with and without RAships. First, I learned that RAships have a great potential to contribute to the development of students' identities as researchers.

Several accounts of doctoral students who worked as RAs provide testimony to research supervisors' commitments to mentoring and research training of RAs. Some of the stories reflected my own relationships with research supervisors who highly contributed to the development of my identity as a researcher. Second, through this research, I have come to see how inaccessible RAships can be to some students, especially part-time students from distant locations and with family obligations. The results have shown that institutional regulations, recruitment practices, and relationships between RAs and research supervisors can hinder doctoral students' participation in RAships. Third, and most importantly, I realized that RAships can be improved to function more effectively as research learning spaces. However, an effort needs to be made to develop proper regulations, implement and respect formal practices, and focus on providing educational and ethical experiences to students who are the future generation of researchers.

The multiple data sources, especially the interviews with doctoral students, research supervisors, and administrators helped me to understand some of the complexities of RAships from different perspectives. The insights I have gained through the results of this study will inform my future practices as an RA and eventually guide my practices as a research supervisor.

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## **Appendix A: Interview Questions for Doctoral Research Assistants**

*Before proceeding with the interview questions, to get a sense of who my participants are, I will ask how they self-identify (e.g., gender, race, cultural background, marital and parental status, year in doctoral program, student status).*

### ***First part of the interview***

1. How many RAships were/are you engaged in?  
*(what was their duration, one or more supervisors, where and when in the program?)*
2. What motivated you to become an RA?  
*(what were your expectations, reasons for becoming an RA?)*
3. How would you describe your experiences as an RA?
4. How would you describe your relationship with your research supervisor(s)?  
*(what were your expectation of the research supervisor, any other relationships within this project? why or why not would you characterize it as mentorship?)*
5. Describe the most meaningful experience(s)/activity(s)/task(s) and how (if) they contributed to your development as a researcher?  
*(roles and responsibilities, skills developed, participation in research community, contribution to doctoral program, future career plans)*
6. Did you encounter any challenges within your RAship?
7. What opportunities or benefits did your RAship(s) offer?  
*(did the RAship meet your expectations?)*
8. In what ways do you consider your RAship experience as educational and ethical?

*(what does educational RAship mean to you? ethical RAship? what made it or prevented it from being so?)*

9. What would be your expectations from the next RAship?

*(would you engage in another RAship, what would you look for, would you recommend RA positions to other students?)*

***Second part of the interview***

1. How did you learn about your RA opportunity(ies)?

2. Did your student status influence in any way securing your RAship(s)?

3. Did your student status (part time or full time) influence your experience as an RA?

4. What influenced your decision to study full-time (or part-time)?

*(having family, children, funding, combination of different factors)*

5. Are there any other factors that influenced your access to and experience within RAship(s)?

*(how are these factors related to your status as PT/FT student?)*

6. What regulations or practices regarding the organization and distribution of RAships did you find useful and why?

7. What regulations or practices regarding the organization and distribution of RAships did you find unhelpful and why?

8. What are your recommendations for enhancing how RAships are organized, distributed, and carried out?

9. What documents or practices have influenced your experiences?

*(can you identify specific documents, online information, or practices?)*

10. What else can you tell me about RAships within this department?

**Appendix B: Interview Questions for Doctoral Students Without Assistantships**

1. What were your reasons for not becoming an RA?
2. Did your student status (part time or full time) influence in any way your decision or lack of opportunity?
3. What influenced your decision to study full-time (or part-time)?  
*(having family, children, funding, combination of different factors)*
4. What other factors played a role?  
*(how are these factors related to your status as PT/FT student?)*
5. Do you think that an RAship would have potential to benefit your doctoral studies?
6. What are your recommendations for changing how RAships are organized, distributed, and carried out?
7. What else can you tell me about RAships within this department?



### Appendix C: Interview Questions for Research Supervisors

*Some questions will require the interviewee to distinguish between full-time and part-time students*

1. How many doctoral RAs did you work with in the past 5 years and how did you find them?

*(do you remember if they were full-time or part-time students? Is there any difference working with full-time or part-time RAs?)*

2. What factors determine selection of a particular student as an RA?

*(hiring decision, what role does student status play in allocating RAships?)*

3. Are there other factors that influence students' access to and experience within RAships?

*(how are these factors related to status as PT/FT student?)*

4. What are your main objectives for hiring RAs?

*(reasons to supervise, are there other reason for hiring students beyond educational considerations?)*

5. What are your expectations of RAs?

*(roles, responsibilities, how helpful are RAs?)*

6. How would you describe your role and responsibilities as a research supervisor?

7. Do you agree that research assistantships should be educational and ethical?

*(what does educational RAship mean to you? ethical RAship? what makes it or prevents it from being so? in what ways do RAships benefit or hinder doctoral studies?)*

8. Describe the most meaningful experience(s)/activity(s)/task(s) for you as an RA supervisor and the ways it (they) contributed to your role as a researcher.
9. Describe the most meaningful experience(s)/activity(s)/task(s) in which an RA has participated and the ways it (they) contributed to her/his development as a researcher.
10. How would you describe your experience as a research supervisor?  
*(what opportunities or benefits have you experienced working with RAs and what opportunities or benefits have your RAs experienced through your RAships?)*
11. How would you describe your relationship with research assistants?  
*(mentorship, participation in research community)*
12. What challenges have you encountered while working with RAs?
13. What regulations and practices guide your RAships?  
*(can you identify specific documents, online information, or practices?)*
14. Do you have any recommendations for enhancing how RAships are organized, distributed, and carried out?
15. What else can you tell me about RAships within this department?

## Appendix D: Interview Questions for Administrators

*Some questions will require the interviewee to distinguish between full-time and part-time students*

1. What kind of funding (internal and external) is available for doctoral students?  
*(are there specific funds for RAships, are there different types of RAships?)*
2. Is there a database or other means to document how many RAships are offered to doctoral students every year or which students work as RAs?  
*(how does it work? who maintains it? who has access? what purposes does it fulfil?)*
3. What is the purpose for offering RAships to doctoral students?  
*(is there a statement of rationale for offering RAships? benefits of RAships?)*
4. How are RAships distributed amongst students?  
*(eligibility, recruitment, duration)*
5. Are there other factors that influence students' access to and experience within RAships?  
*(how are these factors related to status as PT/FT student?)*
6. Do you agree that research assistantships should be educational and ethical?  
*(what does educational RAship mean to you? ethical RAship? what makes them or prevents them from being so?)*
7. What challenges do you hear about from students? RAs? professors?
8. What opportunities or benefits do you hear about from students? RAs? professors?
9. What kind of regulations and practices serve as guiding principles for RAships?  
*(are there any specific documents you reference?)*

10. What kinds of support structures and resources are available to doctoral research assistants and research supervisors?
11. What is your role with respect to students and professors working together on RAships?
12. What are your recommendations for enhancing how RAships are organized, distributed, and carried out?
13. What else can you tell me about RAships within this department?